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Allegiances

THUNDERCLAN

LEADER TWIGSTAR—light brown she-cat with wood-like stripes

DEPUTY SCORCHFIRE—fire-colored tom with amber eyes

MEDICINE CAT HEATHERFUR—gray she-cat with heather-colored eyes

WARRIORS (toms and she-cats without kits)

BRAMBLEFUR—dark brown she-cat with emerald green eyes

DUSTPOOL—dark-gray tabby tom with a cut ear

SANDFUR—light ginger she-cat with hazel eyes

FIRECLAW—orange tabby tom with long claws

DAWNLIGHT—blue-gray she-cat with light blue eyes

TAWNYEYES—lovely she-cat with dappled coat and tawny-colored eyes

APPRENTICE, JAGGEDPAW (golden colored tabby tom with a jagged ear)

CLOUDFUR—cloud-colored tom with copper brown eyes

POPPYTAIL—light brown she-cat with blue eyes

FLAMEFEATHER—flame-colored tabby tom with emerald green

eyes

THORNEAR—golden tabby tom

SPOTTEDPELT—pretty dappled she-cat with warm amber eyes

NEEDLESPOTS—dark-golden she-cat with a broad face

WATERCLOUD—light-gray colored tabby tom with hazel-colored eyes

MOUSECLAW—aggressive tabby tom with a brown pelt

CREAMFUR—cream-colored tom with amber eyes

TIGERSTRIPE—dark-orange tabby tom with tiger-like stripes

RAVENFLIGHT—black, raven-colored tom with bright green eyes

LEAFPELT—light-colored tom with green leaf-colored eyes

APPRENTICE, MISTPAW (light gray she-cat with mist-colored

eyes)

CHERRYPETAL—tortoiseshell she-cat with amber eyes

BRIARHEART—dark-colored she-cat with sky-colored eyes

DOVELEAF—light gray tabby she-cat with green eyes

QUEENS (she-cats expecting or nursing kits)

BLOSSOMHEART—dark-ginger she-cat with pale blue eyes, mother

of Ravenflight's kits: Hollykit (black she-cat) and Squirrelkit (tortoiseshell

she-cat)

FEATHERWING—beautiful gray she-cat with dark-blue eyes, mother

of Scorchfire's kits: Whitekit (snow-white tabby tom) and Brightkit

(cream-colored she-cat)

MALLOWFUR—brown she-cat with light-brown colored eyes, mother

of Watercloud's kits: Larkkit (light brown tabby tom) and Fernkit (dappled

she-cat)

ELDERS (former warriors and queens, now retired)

TORNTAIL—grumpy white tom with black patches; oldest cat in ThunderClan

SOOTFANG—dark gray she-cat with black stripes on her spine

HOLLOWEYES—gray she-cat with blind blue eyes

TWIGSNAP—dark-brown she-cat with tawny colored eyes

SHADOWCLAN

LEADER MOONSTAR—gray she-cat with moon-colored eyes

DEPUTY BERRYFUR—white tabby tom with brown and dark orange patches

MEDICINE CAT APPLEPELT—small brown she-cat with bright green eyes

APPRENTICE, SOFTPAW (cream-colored she-cat with blue

eyes)

WARRIORS

ROWANFUR—ginger brown tabby tom

APPRENTICE, LITTLEPAW (small dark brown tom)

FERRETEYES—gray and black tabby tom

PINERIPPLE—sleek black she-cat

CROWEAR—black and white tabby tom

STOATCLOUD—she-cat with tortoiseshell-and-white pelt

TIGERFOOT—dark brown tabby tom

APPRENTICE, WATERPAW (pale brown tabby she-cat)

TAWNYCLAW—tortoiseshell she-cat with green eyes

POUNCESPIKE—brown tabby tom

OWLFROST—light brown tabby tom

QUEENS

SNOWPELT—pure white she-cat

DAWNBIRD—cream-furred she-cat

ELDERS

SNAKEWATER—dark brown tom with tabby-striped tail

WHITETAIL—white she-cat with long fur, blind in one eye

RATFUR—brown tom

OAKSCAR—small brown tom with scar across his back

IVYFUR—black, white, and tortoiseshell she-cat

KINKTAIL—tabby she-cat, with long tail fur that sticks out at all angles

SMOKESTRIPE—black tabby tom with dark-gray stripes

WINDCLAN

LEADER SPRINGSTAR—brown tabby tom

DEPUTY HAREFLIGHT—brown-and-white tom

APPRENTICE, CLOUDPAW (white tom with flash of black on his chest)

MEDICINE CAT KESTRELFLOWER—mottled gray tom

WARRIORS

CROWCLOUD—dark gray tom

APPRENTICE, SPIKEPAW (gray tabby tom)

NIGHTHOOT—black she-cat

APPRENTICE, GRASSPAW (dark gray tom)

GORSEFUR—very pale gray-and-white tom with blue eyes

WEASELTAIL—ginger tom with white paws

LEAFOAT—dark tabby tom, amber eyes

APPRENTICE, AMBERPAW (pale brown tabby tom)

EMBERTAIL—gray tom with a dark tail

HEATHERPELT—light brown tabby she-cat with blue eyes

BREEZECLAW—black tom with amber eyes

FURZEFROST—gray-and-white she-cat

CROUCHHEART—ginger tom

LARKFOOT—pale brown tabby she-cat

QUEENS

SEDGENOSE—light brown tabby she-cat

ELDERS

WHISKERTAIL—light brown tom

WHITENOSE—small white she-cat

RIVERCLAN

LEADER FROSTSTAR—gray she-cat with blue eyes

DEPUTY REEDWING—black tom

APPRENTICE, LIZARDPAW (light brown tom)

MEDICINE CATS SPOTTEDSHINE—dappled golden she-cat

WILLOWFUR—gray tabby she-cat

WARRIORS

MINTWING—light gray tabby tom

APPRENTICE, SMOKEPAW (gray tabby tom)

MINNOWNOSE—dark gray she-cat

MALLOWTAIL—light brown tabby tom

APPRENTICE, HAVENPAW (black and white she-cat)

GRASSFUR—light brown tom

DUSKPELT—brown tabby she-cat

MOSSHEART—tortoiseshell she-cat with blue eyes

APPRENTICE, PERCHPAW (gray-and-white she-cat)

SHIMMERFUR—silver she-cat

LAKEPELT—gray tabby she-cat

HERONEAR—dark gray-and-black tom

QUEENS

ICEFUR—white she-cat with blue eyes

PETALWING—gray-and-white she-cat

ELDERS

POUNCETAIL—ginger-and-white tom

PEBBLEPOUNCE—mottled gray tom

RUSHFOOT—light brown tabby tom

Prologue

"Don't leave me, please!" Whiteheart cried. It hurt so much to see his usually strong mentor lying on the grassy forest grounds. "I couldn't bear to lose you as well as Scorchfire! Please, Heatherfur, stay with me!"

Heatherfur opened one cloudy blue eye, staring straight at him. "My apprentice," she croaked. "When you first became a 'paw, I never thought you would succeed so much. You are a truly dedicated medicine cat." Blood welled out of a large, deep cut on her throat.

Whiteheart could barely keep his mind from spinning. "You'll be fine," he mewed, struggling to stay calm. "I'll get help, and I'll put cobwebs all over the wound, and marigold, and you'll be able to take a nice nap. When you wake up, you'll feel all better, and you'll forget this ever happened."

Heatherfur gave a wheeze, and then a noise that sounded like a horrible attempt to purr. "You have your father's spirit," she mewed hoarsely. "I can hear StarClan calling to me. I'm sorry to leave you, Whiteheart, but you'll be fine as ThunderClan's sole medicine cat."

"No, I won't!" Whiteheart croaked, grief in his voice. "Just stay a bit longer. Please, Heatherfur, please."

"I knew this would happen," Heatherfur murmured. "StarClan told this to me before that I would be joining them soon."

Whiteheart hung his head. "If I was here instead of grieving Mistfur's death like a furball, this would've never happened," he choked out. "I'm such a mouse-brain."

Heatherfur sighed. "It's not your fault, Whiteheart. Things just happen. It's hard to let go of cats you love the most. This was destined to happen, and nothing could stop this. Believe me when I

say this: you will be an amazing and loyal medicine cat on your own. You don't need me anymore."

"I will always need you, Heatherfur," Whiteheart murmured. "You were my mentor, and I thank you for all you have taught me." He looked down at the grass. "How can I be a loyal medicine cat?" He asked, half to himself. "I fell in love with Mistfur, and now everyone knows. I am not a good medicine cat! I shouldn't have loved her. Now its messed up everything!" He looked up, despair dancing in his blue eyes.

Heatherfur reached out her tail and flicked Whiteheart's shoulder lightly before letting her tail drop again. "Never say that. It all was destined to happen. Nothing could change it. Your Clanmates will learn to trust and understand you. You have trodden on a long, difficult cat, and I respect you for that. But all the same, as difficult as it has been, it has made you the medicine cat your Clan will need the most: a loyal, hard-working, humble medicine cat. Do not doubt yourself, Whiteheart. I believe in you."

Whiteheart said nothing, sorrow clouding his mind. Suddenly, Heatherfur's head jerked up. "When fire meets mist and water, mist must fall, and water must survive!" she hissed.

"What?!" Whiteheart asked urgently. "What are you trying to tell me?" But the light had already gone from Heatherfur's eyes. Whiteheart sighed and gently licked Heatherfur's eyes shut.

He looked up at the sky. *Oh, StarClan, I have lost two of the cats I cherish or love. I hope this is the path you wish for me to tread on, and I hope that I have done well.*

Chapter 1

"When is he going to open his eyes?"

"He'll open his eyes when he's ready, Mallowfur."

Whitekit felt a paw prodding at him. He let out a squeak of annoyance and snuggled closer to Featherwing's belly. *Yes, I'll open my eyes when I'm ready.* But once again, to Whitekit's annoyance, someone poked him. He opened his eyes, ready to bat at whoever did it. Brightkit, snuggled next to him, had her big blue eyes open already.

What color are my eyes? Whitekit thought. Before he could ask Featherwing, Brightkit let out a squeal of surprise.

"You opened your eyes!" Brightkit squeaked happily. "Now we can go outside and explore the camp?"

Explore the camp? That sounded fun! Whitekit nodded eagerly and watched Brightkit clumsily climb out of the nest. Whitekit followed, nearly slipping but then catching himself once again.

Featherwing opened one eye. "Where are you two going?"

Whitekit felt himself go bright red with embarrassment. But Brightkit, without blinking an eye, mewed, "We were going to explore the camp, Featherwing."

Featherwing purred. "I see you've opened your eyes, Whitekit. You can go explore the camp. Just don't bother the warriors or elders, and do *not* bother Twigstar." Brightkit nodded, and Whitekit copied her. "Be good!" She called as Brightkit and Whitekit scrambled into the camp.

"Wow!" Brightkit mewed. "It's even better than I imagined!"

"It is!" Whitekit squeaked.

"Look, Whitekit!" Brightkit squeaked. "There are some ShadowClan warriors over there!" She flicked her tiny tail towards the elders sunning themselves on a rock in the corner. "Let's go attack them!" She bounced away, her thorn-sharp claws scraping against the camp floor.

Whitekit's belly churned with nervousness, but he followed Brightkit obediently. Brightkit batted at the elders, while Whitekit pounced on Twigsnap's tail.

"Hey!" Torntail grumbled. "Can't anyone get some peace with these kits around?"

"Don't be so grumpy, Torntail," Twigsnap scolded. Torntail opened his mouth to speak, but before he did, Brightkit let out a yowl.

"ShadowClan warriors!" Brightkit mewed, sounding dignified and grown-up. "Do you promise that ThunderClan warriors are the best? Or will you insist on feeling our teeth and claws in your fur to get you to agree?"

Twigsnap exchanged an amused look with Sootfang. "We promise," she mewed.

"And you?" Whitekit eyed Torntail and Holloweyes, fluffing his fur up and baring his teeth. *I have to look scary so that they give in!*

"We promise," Holloweyes croaked, her eyes flashing with amusement.

"I guess," Torntail muttered, scraping his worn-out claws on the rock.

"Yes!" Whitekit bounced around happily, his tiny pink mouth wide open in glee. "ThunderClan warriors are the best, strongest warriors in the forest!" *I'm going to be the best warrior in the forest, and everyone will look up to me! I'll lead ThunderClan and make sure that it's the strongest Clan in the forest!* He thought gleefully.

"Hey!" Brightkit mewed. "Let's go into Twigstar's den!" She bounded away with Whitekit at her heels.

As they entered the den, Twigstar was grooming herself, her tail wrapped neatly around her.

"Wow!" Whitekit squeaked. "Your den is great! Can I sleep in it?" *One day I'll be leader!*

Twigstar's whiskers twitched with amusement. "We'll have to see if Featherwing lets you."

Featherwing! Suddenly, Whitekit felt a pang of fear. "Please don't tell us we're in here!" he begged. "She'll line her nest with my pelt!" Twigstar let out a *mrrow* of laughter.

"I don't think I need to tell her," she meowed. "Turn around, Whitekit." Whitekit spun around in alarm. *Featherwing!*

"Um . . ." Brightkit stammered.

Featherwing clearly didn't look as amused as Twigstar was. "What are you kits doing, bothering Twigstar like that? Twigstar has some important duties for her to finish, and she doesn't need two kits pestering her! I am so sorry, Twigstar," she added, dipping her head towards Twigstar. "I don't know what went into them."

Twigstar purred. "No, it's alright. I don't remember a kit that didn't get into trouble. You must have your paws full with those two!"

Featherwing sighed. "Yes, I do. Come on, kits, let's go back to the nursery." She started pushing the kits over to the nursery.

"But Featherwing! We didn't finish exploring the camp yet!" Whitekit mewed. "You *will* let us outside later, won't you?"

"Yes!" Brightkit agreed. "We should first finish exploring, then we'll go back."

Featherwing let out a puff of annoyance. "No, you two are in for a nice, quiet afternoon. And what's this I hear about attacking the elders? You kits have to learn to respect them!"

Whitekit hung his head, ashamed. But his sister Brightkit didn't seem quite as keen. "We were just trying to have some fun," she

mewed. Whitekit cringed at his sister's words

Featherwing's usually-warm blue gaze became cold as she glared at the kits. "Brightkit and Whitekit, I want you two to go apologize to the elders for attacking them, and then come straight back to the nursery." She padded back to the nursery.

"I guess we should go say sorry," Whitekit finally mewed.

Brightkit snorted, her tiny pink mouth hanging wide in protest. "And get fleas and ticks all over me? No way!" Her sharp claws scraped the ground.

"I don't want to, either," Whitekit grumbled. "But if I'm doing it, you're doing it too."

Brightkit opened her mouth to protest, then closed it. "Fine," she squeaked, annoyed. As the two tiny kits padded over to the elders, Torntail let out a quiet growl.

Holloweyes glared at him. "They're just kits!"

Torntail flicked his tail. "Well, their claws and teeth are as sharp as any warrior's, so we should treat them like warriors."

Whitekit approached the elders cautiously. "We're really sorry," he mumbled.

Torntail's whiskers twitched. Was he *amused? "* Where's the other mouse-brain?" Torntail asked.

Brightkit, who was crouched behind Whitekit, let out an indignant cry. "Hey! I'm not a mouse-brain!"

"He didn't mean it," Twigsnap soothed. "You mustn't worry about him. He's just looking for some fun."

"Well, he has a funny way of doing it," Brightkit growled, so quiet that Whitekit had to strain his ears to hear it.

Sootfang looked at the two kits, her amber eyes softening. "It was very nice of you to apologize," she mewed. "You kits are acting like

warriors. Warriors must use words to fix things sometimes before they use their claws and teeth."

Brightkit's eyes brightened, and Whitekit began to feel better. "Thanks," Whitekit mumbled, embarrassed, as the two kits padded to the nursery. Featherwing was there waiting for them. Although her blue gaze was still sharp, it shone with love for the two kits. Whitekit knew that however much she tried to act strict, she adored the kits.

"Are you done apologizing?" Featherwing asked. Brightkit and Whitekit nodded. "Good. You two are going to take a nice nap."

I'm not sleepy, Whitekit thought, but he didn't say it out loud. From Brightkit's stubborn face she was making, she wasn't either. As Whitekit curled up next to Brightkit and Featherwing, Brightkit mewed softly, "The elders called me a warrior."

"Good for you," Featherwing replied. The last thing Whitekit saw was Featherwing's soft gray fur before he gave way to sleep.

Chapter 2

Whitekit opened his eyes as daylight streamed through the nursery walls. Brightkit was already stirring, and Featherwing was wide awake, glancing around.

Three moons had passed since he had first opened his eyes. Whitekit sighed. *Another day as a 'kit.* He couldn't wait till he was six moons old. He would be able to be a *warrior*!

As Whitekit scrambled out of the nest, Brightkit stirred, and her eyes opened. "Wanna go on another adventure?" she mewed sleepily.

Whitekit shook his head. "Thanks, Brightkit, but I'm just going to get some fresh air. Brightkit gave no response. She was probably still sleeping. *Sleepy-head,* Whitekit thought affectionately as he padded outside. Warriors were already streaming out of their nests, ready for patrolling and hunting.

Whitekit noticed Heatherfur, the Clan medicine cat, disappear into her den. *I wonder what she's up to.* Excitement fizzed inside of Whitekit as he crept into the den.

Unfortunately, Heatherfur turned around and fixed the kit with her heather gaze before Whitekit could hide. "What are you up to?" she meowed.

Whitekit ducked his head, embarrassed. "I just wanted to see what you were up to," he mumbled.

"Well, you're welcome to stay and watch," Heatherfur mewed cheerfully. Just then, Scorchfire padded inside the medicine cat den. *My father!* Whitekit thought joyfully.

Scorchfire licked Whitekit on the ears affectionately before turning to Heatherfur, dipping his head. "I stepped on a thorn the other day, and it's getting all red and warm now on my pad," he explained.

"Did you come let me take it out?" Heatherfur asked briskly, her blue gaze unwavering.

Scorchfire hesitated. "Well . . . I didn't want to bother you. The thorn came out when I wrenched it out myself."

Heatherfur bristled. "You wouldn't be bothering me. It's my job to help cats, and it would've made my life a lot easier if you would've just come to me." she glanced at the herb piles, muttering something. "It's red and hot and puffy, right?" she asked.

Scorchfire nodded.

"It's infected," Heatherfur explained. "I'll just rub some marigold-and-burdock root poultice on it, and you'll have to let it sink in. You might have to wait a little before you can start walking again. If that doesn't work, I'll add some oak leaves to the poultice."

Scorchfire groaned, but he didn't argue with the she-cat as he crouched down on the ground. "Why can't you just put on some dock leaves to help with the pain and let me go?" he complained.

"Because that wouldn't fight the infection," Heatherfur replied simply. She spat out chewed-up burdock root and mixed that with the marigold. After that, she rubbed it onto Scorchfire's paw.

Whitekit watched with wide eyes. *Wow, Heatherfur's being really important! I want to be a medicine cat when I become an apprentice.*

Scorchfire muttered something, ducking his head.

"How did you do that?" Whitekit asked, awed.

"Marigold and burdock root are both good herbs for fighting infection. Instead of making cats eat it, making poultices out of herbs do the job without exposing cats to the taste. And oak leaves also help with infection, but only very strong infections, and Scorchfire's infection is a mild infection. It's not too serious."

"How do you tell if it's infected?" Whitekit asked eagerly.

Heatherfur's whiskers twitched. "He's an inquisitive one," she told

Scorchfire. "You must have your paws full with that one." Scorchfire murmured agreement. As Whitekit puffed out his chest, pleased, Heatherfur turned her warm gaze back onto Whitekit. "You can tell it's infected if it's red. But also you should check to see if heat is raising up from it, and if it's swelling or puffy."

"Cool!" Whitekit exclaimed. *I'm learning so much in just one day!* "What do you do when a cat gets a wound?"

Heatherfur let out a *mrrow* of laughter, exchanging amused glances with Scorchfire. "You stop the bleeding with cobwebs, and marigold to protect it from infection. Sometimes we add comfrey to soothe the pain if it's serious, or dock leaves to soothe the pain if it's just a scratch. Goldenrod is also useful if you need to heal wounds." She used her paw to gesture towards a pile of green stems with bright, spiky yellow plants growing on the sides of it.

"That's awesome!" Whitekit exclaimed. "What's this plant?" He prodded at a plant with yellow buds growing on it.

"That's tansy. We use it for curing coughs. Too much isn't good for a cat, though," Heatherfur explained.

"And this one? And this other one?" Whitekit poked at two different herbs. One was a green, leafy plant with violet-colored flowers growing on the sides of it. The other were grayish-blue berries that grew on the branch.

"The berries are called juniper berries and they help with bellyaches and breathing, if a cat has sickness. The other plant is catmint. Careful, don't touch, it's very precious. We use it for greencough. It grows well on the border between WindClan and us, but there's not much, so we have to save it."

"What about these? They look weird." Whitekit sniffed at a pile of tiny black seeds.

"Those are poppy seeds. We use them to make a cat sleepy, and it's good for cats that are in a lot of pain or shock." When Whitekit opened his mouth to fire another question at Heatherfur, she blinked warmly at him. "That's enough for today, little one," she

mewed gently. "But I must admit, you would be a good medicine cat apprentice. You're very inquisitive and you pick up on things very quickly."

Whitekit's heart warmed at the praise. *That's because I will be a medicine cat apprentice.*

Chapter 3

"Brightkit, you have reached the age of six moons, and it is time for you to be apprenticed. From this day on, until you receive your warrior name, you will be known as Brightpaw. Your mentor will be Thornear. I hope Thornear will pass down all he knows to you." Whitekit could hear Brightpaw trembling with anticipation and excitement, and Whitekit pressed his thick white pelt to her's comfortingly. Twigstar turned to the golden tabby tom. "Thornear, you are ready to take on an apprentice. You have received excellent training from Watercloud, and you have shown yourself to be brave and intelligent. You will be the mentor of Brightpaw, and I expect you to pass on all you know to Brightpaw." Thornear dipped his head respectfully. Brightpaw touched noses with Thornear.

"Brightpaw! Brightpaw! Brightpaw!" ThunderClan yowled.

Twigstar held up her long, plumy tail for silence. She then turned to Whitekit. Whitekit trembled, excitement fizzing inside him as the whole Clan turned their eyes onto him. He remembered Hollypaw and Squirrelpaw's apprentice ceremony a moon ago, and he could hardly believe it was his turn.

"Whitekit, you have reached the age of six moons, and it is time for you to be apprenticed. From this day on, until you receive your medicine cat name, you will be known as Whitepaw. Your mentor will be Heatherfur." Whitepaw's tail twitched with excitement and joy. He was truly going to be a medicine cat apprentice! "I hope Heatherfur will pass down all she knows to you." Twigstar turned to Heatherfur. "Heatherfur, you are ready to take on an apprentice. You have received excellent training from Spottedwing, and you have shown yourself to be intelligent and quick-witted. You will be the mentor of Whitepaw, and I expect you to pass down all you know to Whitepaw." Whitepaw padded over to Heatherfur, joy crashing over him, and touched noses with her.

"Whitepaw! Whitepaw! Whitepaw!" ThunderClan yowled. Whitepaw glanced in the crowd, searching for Scorchfire and Featherwing,

and bounded over to them. Brightpaw was already there, rubbing her cheek against Featherwing's. Whitepaw slowed his pace towards Scorchfire.

"I'm so proud of you," Scorchfire murmured, licking him on the head. "I'm sure you'll be a wonderful medicine cat."

"Yes," Featherwing agreed, her blue eyes shining with pride. "And Brightpaw will be an excellent warrior!"

Brightpaw padded over to Whitepaw and gently cuffed his ears affectionately. "I can't wait for our training! I'm going to be the best medicine cat ever!" She boasted.

"And I'll be the best medicine cat ever," Whitepaw purred.

Scorchfire and Featherwing gazed at the two apprentices affectionately. "I wouldn't expect anything else," Scorchfire meowed.

Thornear and Heatherfur padded over to them. "Hate to break it, but my apprentice and I need to explore Clan territory," Thornear explained, flicking his tail-tip over Brightpaw's nose.

Brightpaw's blue eyes widened with excitement. "Okay! Bye, Whitepaw! Have fun with Heatherfur!" She ran her tail on Whitepaw's flank quickly before dashing off with Thornear.

"Come with me, Whitepaw," Heatherfur mewed. "It's time for your training to start." Whitepaw's eyes lit up as he gave Featherwing one more quick lick on the cheek and then followed Heatherfur into the medicine cat den.

"You can sleep in the extra nest." Heatherfur gestured with her paw towards a mossy nest with a few feathers lining it.

"Wow! Thank you, Heatherfur!" Whitepaw exclaimed, prodding at the nest. "It's really soft!"

"It's used for patients that are injured or sick, but I can make another nest for that," Heatherfur explained. "Now, let's get started with some herb identifying," Heatherfur added briskly.

Whitepaw bounded over to the herb stocks. "I remember some herbs already," he meowed proudly. "There's goldenrod, there's poppy seeds, here's some catmint; oh, I recognize these berries, juniper, right? Wait, what's this?" Whitepaw poked a green plant with spiky twigs on the side of it.

Heatherfur let out a *mrrow* of laughter. "Slow down, Whitepaw. Although you're right; you must have keen memory. The herb there is thyme; it's very useful for calming a cat down in shock. Do you remember anything else here?"

Whitepaw searched the den for familiar herbs and other useful remedies. "There's marigold, used for fighting infection, same with the burdock root, and the oak leaves. Cobwebs to stop bleeding, comfrey to soothe more serious pains, and tansy for coughs."

"Very good!" Heatherfur praised. Just then, Needlespots padded in, one paw held in the air. Her dark golden fur was ruffled instead of the usual sleekness, and her broad face was twisted in pain.

"What happened, Needlespots? Anything I can do for you?" Heatherfur asked.

Needlespots grunted. "I was hunting with Spottedpelt, and when I was chasing a squirrel, I ran into a bramble thicket and got a thorn stuck in my pad."

Heatherfur's eyes glimmered with faint amusement before she turned to Whitepaw. "So, what do you think we should do?"

Whitepaw gulped. *My first real injury!* "Take out the thorn and put cobwebs and marigold on it?" he guessed.

Heatherfur shook her head. "No, but that's close. We take out the thorn, give it a good lick, and put some marigold on it. Watch carefully, Whitepaw. This happens often, so you'll have to do it many times." She bent down and swiftly extracted the thorn from Needlespot's pad. "Give it a good lick," she said through clenched teeth. Needlespots nodded and started licking her pad vigorously. After a while, a look of relief came to her face.

"That feels much better," she mewed.

"Okay, Whitepaw, chew the marigold up to pulp like this." Heatherfur took a small piece of marigold, chewed it for awhile, and spat it out. Whitepaw copied her, spitting it out when he was confident it was pulp-like. "Good. Rub it on her pad." Whitepaw took the pulp on his paw and rubbed it on Needlespots's pad. She relaxed.

"Thanks a lot, Heatherfur and Whitepaw! It feels a lot better." She dipped her head towards the two cats before wobbling away. "By the way, you're doing great, Whitepaw!"

As Whitepaw watched her wobble away, he felt a glimmer of satisfaction. *I did it!* He was faintly aware of Heatherfur's gaze on him.

"You did well," Heatherfur purred. "You're going to be a good medicine cat."

Whitepaw purred. "I hope! I can't wait to get my medicine cat name!"

Heatherfur's whiskers twitched. "That might be awhile. You are aware that medicine cat apprenticeships take longer than regular warrior apprenticeships, so Brightpaw might become a warrior before you do?"

Whitepaw blinked. Of course, he had known; he just hadn't thought about it that much. "It doesn't matter to me," he mewed at last. "I just want to be a medicine cat. Brightpaw's my littermate, I won't mind being after her. I'll be proud of her when she becomes a warrior."

Heatherfur nodded. "Good. Putting that aside, you also have to remember the medicine cat code as well as the honorable rules of the warrior code. You can't take a mate or fall in love, you can't have kits . . ." she shot Whitepaw a dry look. "Although it's the poor she-cat that has to put up with you and the kits, so it doesn't really apply to you." Whitepaw stifled a purr. "You can't retire until your apprentice is ready to fulfill your duties solely. You are only

allowed to discuss your dreams, prophecies, or omens with Twigstar or the other medicine cats at the gathering when you understand what you mean. Don't give away too much, even to your own Clanmates, and *especially* towards warriors from other Clans."

Whitepaw's whiskers twitched. "Yes, yes, O' Great One," he mewed, amusement glimmering in his eyes. *That'll be easy! I'm never going to be mooning over a she-cat. Disgusting!* he thought, turning his attention back to Heatherfur as she explained more herbs.

Chapter 4

Whitepaw shifted his paws excitedly and nervously, staring at his piece of fresh-kill. The thrush was fat and mouthwatering, giving signs that leaf-bare was finally unleashing its cold, hard grip on the Clans. Yet he could not choke down a bite. It was his first gathering as an apprentice!

"Whitepaw?" Whitepaw recognized the voice of his mentor. "Try to eat something! The Clan is about to leave to go to the gathering."

Whitepaw nodded, taking a nibble of fresh-kill before pushing it away. Brightpaw bounded next to him. "Aren't you excited? Hey, can I have that?" she asked, licking her lips. Prey had become much more plentiful. As Whitepaw opened his mouth to reply, Blossomheart marched over to the two apprentices.

"Mallowfur would like that much more, thank you," she meowed. "Larkkit and Fernkit barely survived leaf-bare, and Mallowfur needs to make enough milk for the two of them." As she padded away to the nursery, Brightpaw's tail drooped. Whitepaw felt pitiful for his sister and surprisingly slightly amused.

"Don't worry," Whitepaw murmured, pressing his muzzle onto Brightpaw's flank. "What Blossomheart says is true. She's just worried about Mallowfur; it's Mallowfur's first litter, and Mallowfur was part of Blossomheart's first litter."

Before he had time to say anymore, Twigstar jumped onto the Highrock. "ThunderClan, it's time to go to the Gathering!" Whitepaw's pelt tingled with excitement, separating from his littermate and standing next to Heatherfur. As Whitepaw walked silently next to Heatherfur, he noticed Brightpaw standing next to Jaggedpaw, so close that their pelts brushed. Whitepaw stifled a purr. Clearly Brightpaw was fond of the older apprentice.

As Whitepaw got closer to the island, he gasped. It was amazing. There was a fallen tree on one side of the island, used as a bridge.

The island was mostly grassy with a few trees lining the edges. Black water rippled over the tree branch slightly.

That looks scary! Whitepaw thought, watching Twigstar step onto the tree delicately and precisely, her whole Clan trailing behind her. He had never particularly liked water, and he had always thought RiverClan was mouse-brained to actually *enjoy* swimming. As he watched Brightpaw bound up the tree confidently, he suppressed a sigh. Of course Brightpaw wasn't scared at all. And if she was, she certainly had done a good job covering it up.

A warm pelt pressed against his. He looked up to see Heatherfur's encouraging gaze. "It was scary the first time for me, too. It'll be fine. Watch." His mentor delicately stepped on the slick, slippery tree, padding up slowly but confidently. Whitepaw held his breath, waiting for her to lose her balance and stumble, but she did it so carefully that it looked easy. When Heatherfur got to the top, Whitepaw took a deep breath and stepped cautiously on the branch. It wasn't as slippery as Whitepaw had thought. He padded up more confidently, but then stumbled and slipped. As he plunged into the black water, he felt his heart skip a beat.

No more than one second later, he felt teeth sink into his scruff as a cat hauled him up. As he turned to look at the cat, he caught a glimpse of Heatherfur's worried gaze in the darkness. "Are you alright?" she asked anxiously.

Whitepaw coughed up some water. "I'm fine." As he entered the island, Brightpaw came sprinting over.

She took one look at his dripping, slicked-back fur and gasped. "Wow, what happened? You look like a RiverClan cat!"

"Thanks for asking if I'm fine," Whitepaw grunted. "And don't *ever* call me RiverClan. It was an accident. I'm ThunderClan through and through."

Brightpaw let out a *mrrow* of laughter. "Alright. Let's sit together over there." She gestured towards a pile of ferns with her tail-tip. "I'll race you!" She dashed off, Whitepaw at her heels.

When they collapsed in the ferns, they were both out of breath. "I won!" Brightpaw managed to gasp.

"Brightpaw! Whitepaw! That is no way to act at a Gathering!" Featherwing scolded, her piercing blue gaze set on the two apprentices. "You must act polite, or I'll tell Twigstar to send you two unruly apprentices back to camp!"

Heatherfur appeared behind their mother. "It's nice that you want to sit with your littermate, Whitepaw, but all the medicine cats sit over there." She flicked her ears towards a clump of moss. A few cats were already sitting over there. "Come on, I'll introduce you."

As she led Whitepaw towards the group of cats, he felt his heart race. *I'm finally meeting the other medicine cats!*

One cat — a mottled gray tom — raised his head as the two cats approached. "About time," he growled.

"Don't mind him; he's always grumpy, but he means well," Heatherfur murmured into Whitepaw's ear. "Everyone, this is my apprentice, Whitepaw." Murmurs of welcome came from the other medicine cats. "That's Kestrelspring over there, the WindClan medicine cat," she meowed, gesturing towards the mottled gray tom. Kestrelspring flicked his tail in gruff welcome. "Over there are the two RiverClan medicine cats — Mothshine and Willowfur." Heatherfur flicked her ears towards a golden dappled she-cat and a gray tabby she-cat. "That small brown she-cat is Applepelt, and the cream-colored she-cat next to Applepelt is Softpaw, both from ShadowClan." Applepelt raised her bright green gaze towards Heatherfur, then flicking towards Whitepaw.

"Welcome," she purred. Softpaw's blue eyes were the exact same color as his mother's, but they were much harder and wary.

"Hi, I guess," she muttered.

"Hi," he mewed brightly, trying not to look put off by Softpaw's wariness. "I'm Whitepaw."

"Hello, Whitepaw," Mothshine greeted. Though she didn't look too

friendly, she looked a lot nicer than Softpaw. No matter the name, Softpaw was definitely not soft. Willowfur remained silent next to Mothshine, her eyes fixed on a tiny beetle crawling on a leaf. Mothshine nudged her. "Say hello," she murmured.

Willowfur flicked her tail. "I'm not your apprentice; you can't boss me around anymore," she teased. "Hello," she added. She looked friendly enough. "I hope the apprenticeship is going well. Do you enjoy it?" she asked.

"A lot, thanks," Whitepaw replied.

"He's very good at remembering herbs and their uses already," Heatherfur added.

"Wow!" Mothshine looked impressed.

"How is WindClan doing, Kestrelspring?" Heatherfur asked, only to be silenced with a cold hiss from Softpaw.

"The Gathering's starting!" she hissed through clenched teeth. Whitepaw swapped amused looks with Heatherfur. Clearly this difficult apprentice had gotten her fur ruffled earlier.

"Fine, thanks," Kestrelspring murmured out of the corner of his mouth. "And Softpaw, show more respect for the senior medicine cats, or I'll line my nest with your pelt," he growled. "Senior medicine cats know much more than you do, so try to listen instead of talking."

Softpaw scraped her thorn-sharp claws against the dirt that covered the island. "You're not my mentor, so you can't tell me what to do!"

"Hush!" Heatherfur scolded. "The Gathering is starting!"

As Whitepaw watched Twigstar jump on the branches, he noticed 3 other cats on separate branches not far away from Twigstar. *Those must be the other Clan leaders. And the cats sitting directly under the leaders must be their deputies.* "Who are the other cats?" he murmured to Heatherfur.

"The gray she-cat with the blue eyes is Froststar of RiverClan. WindClan's leader is the tall brown tabby tom, Springstar. Moonstar, the gray tabby she-cat with moon-colored eyes is ShadowClan's leader. The deputies are Berryfur from ShadowClan, Harespring from WindClan, and Reedwing from RiverClan." She paused her mew.

"Let the Gathering begin!" Twigstar yowled. The noise suddenly quieted down, and all eyes and ears were pricked towards the leaders.

Froststar stepped forward. "I will share first." Her icy blue eyes darted around the clearing, as if challenging anyone to say anything. Silence met her cold stare. "RiverClan has done well in spite of leaf-bare, and as it draws to a close, fish are coming back. However, we have one problem. WindClan has been stealing our prey!" The last of her words ended as a furious cry.

Arguments broke out between all of the cats. "No WindClan cat has stolen RiverClan prey!" A ginger tom snarled.

A RiverClan she-cat sitting next to him glared at him, her silver fur bristling. "Then why have we been finding WindClan scents on our territory?"

"Hush!" Springstar lifted his tail for silence, and arguments died away. "Froststar," he meowed coolly, turning to look at the gray she-cat. "Not only would we have to cross Twolegplace and the horseplace to get to your territory, but how would we catch fish? Only RiverClan has the acute abilities to catch fish." His amber eyes sparked with defiance as he waited for the RiverClan leader to respond.

"How else could anyone scent WindClan on our territory?" Froststar spat. "Perhaps you're so caught up in being prideful of your Clan, Springstar, to notice that some of your warriors may be slinking out to hunt on our territory! And in case you haven't noticed, we do have fat woodland prey in our territory as well as fish!"

Wow! Whitepaw thought. *The leaders are* really *fighting!*

As Springstar opened his mouth to snarl defiance, Twigstar stepped forward. "Stop!" she yowled. "Look at the moon! StarClan is angry! We must stop arguing immediately!" Whitepaw glanced up at the moon and gasped. Thick, dark clouds had started forming in front of the moon, covering any moonlight.

Angry snarls immediately silenced. Froststar glared at Springstar. "I'll let it go this time, but the next time we find WindClan scents on our territory, you'll know about it!"

Although Springstar dipped his head towards the RiverClan leader silently, Whitepaw swore he could see anger glittering in his eyes.

Twigstar flicked her tail. "I will share next. ThunderClan has thrived, and the fresh-kill pile gets more full every day. Prey is returning in the woodlands, and by each passing day, it becomes warmer. We also have two new apprentices. Whitekit and Brightkit have become Whitepaw and Brightpaw."

"Whitepaw! Brightpaw! Whitepaw! Brightpaw!" cats from all Clans yowled. Whitepaw ducked his head as unfamiliar gazes settled on him, embarrassed.

After that, Moonstar shared her news — like the others, ShadowClan was doing well, and they had two new apprentices: Waterpaw and Littlepaw. WindClan was also doing well, and rabbits were returning from their burrows.

"This Gathering is over!" Moonstar declared. As Twigstar leaped off the branch, Whitepaw couldn't help but admire her agility. With a flick of her tail, she led ThunderClan out of the island and back into the gorse clearing where their camp was located. Hollykit and Squirrelkit bounded over to Whitepaw.

"Well?" Squirrelkit demanded.

"How was it?" Hollykit asked.

"Good," Whitepaw murmured. He felt half asleep. "I'll tell you everything tomorrow. As he lumbered sleepily into the medicine

den and into his nest, the soft rustle of the ferns at the entrance of the camp and the soft *swish* of grass lured him into a deep sleep.

Chapter 5

A pale strip of light washed through the camp, making everything seem eerie gray. Whitepaw pushed himself to his paws. Heatherfur was already awake, absorbed in counting the herb stocks. Finally, she glanced up.

"Oh, hello, Whitepaw," Heatherfur greeted. "You're up early."

"Not as early as you." Whitepaw glanced back at the clearing. The rising sun had suddenly become much brighter, and half-awake cats had already started streaming out of their dens. Whitepaw watched Dustpool groom himself carefully and Doveleaf giving Watercloud, her mate, an affectionate lick on the cheek.

"Whitepaw!"

Whitepaw wrenched his gaze away from the clearing and glanced back at Heatherfur. "Yes? What?"

Heatherfur kneaded at the soft earth impatiently. "I said, we're low on comfrey and catmint."

"I could go collect some," Whitepaw offered.

"That would be nice," Heatherfur mewed. "Comfrey grows well near — "

"The RiverClan border, and catmint grows in the garden near the training arena," Whitepaw interrupted. "I know, I know."

Heatherfur opened her mouth to speak, and Whitepaw braced himself for a scolding. But then, he noticed Heatherfur's eyes glimmering with something. Heatherfur was *amused?* "I taught you too well," she meowed playfully, giving Whitepaw an affectionate nudge. "Take Mistpaw and Leafpelt with you as well. It'll be good training for her."

Whitepaw twitched his ears. "Alright, but I could handle just fine

by myself," he grumbled.

"It's always good to have a warrior escort, just in case there are rogues or intruders that are looking for fights. Or even angry kittypets," she added with a sly look on her face.

Whitepaw sniffed. "I can face kittypets." He scanned the clearing. "Where are Leafpelt and Mistpaw, anyway?"

Heatherfur resumed her gaze back onto the poultice. "Probably in their dens. Leafpelt got caught in a couple of brambles, so I'm making an oak-leaf-and-chervil-leaf poultice for him to stop infection."

"I'll get Mistpaw and Leafpelt," Whitepaw meowed. He padded over to the apprentices den first, and immediately noticed the small silhouette of Mistpaw, her flank rising up and down. "Mistpaw," he hissed.

Mistpaw rolled over in her nest, opened her eyes, and yawned. "What is it?" she mewed sleepily.

"You're coming with me to gather herbs," Whitepaw responded.

Mistpaw yawned. "Great," she replied, her mew slurred with sleep. "That'll be boring."

Whitepaw rolled his eyes. *Cheeky cub!* "Well, you're going to have to. I need someone to help me with gathering herbs, and I need a guard as well," he retorted. "So deal with it!"

Mistpaw jerked straight up and stared at him in disbelief. For a second, Whitepaw felt a horrible feeling of dread crawl up in his stomach. *Oh no, did I go too far?* He waited with guilt for Mistpaw to counter him, but she stayed silent. Then she let out a *mrrow* of laughter, to Whitepaw's amazement.

"You have your sister's spirit," she meowed earnestly, before rising up from her nest and stretching her legs, shaking out stray moss from her pelt. "Alright, I'm coming. And I'm supposing Leafpelt is also coming?"

Whitepaw scuffed his claws into a stray piece of moss. "That's right." Why did she have to be such a know-it-all? Just because she was the Twigstar's daughter didn't mean that she had to be snotty. "Well," he declared briskly, "I'm going to go go wake Leafpelt." As he padded out of the medicine cat den, he snorted with disgust. *I can't believe she's a sensible, strong leader's* kit*!*

After waking up Leafpelt, he returned back to the open clearing. Mistpaw was already there, giving her ears a thorough wash.

"Hi," she mewed when he reluctantly padded closer towards her. "Where's Leafpelt? He's usually awake by now."

"He's getting something for his injury," Whitepaw replied, feeling a glimmer of satisfaction. *Finally I know something she doesn't!*

As if on cue, Leafpelt walked out of the medicine den, a poultice plastered to his hind leg. "Alright, I'm ready," Leafpelt purred. "I'm sorry for taking so long. Where do we need to go, Whitepaw?"

"RiverClan border for comfrey, and the garden near the training center for catmint," Whitepaw responded.

"Alright, where do you want to go first, Whitepaw?" Leafpelt asked.

Before Whitepaw could utter a word, Mistpaw turned to her mentor. "Excuse me for interrupting, Leafpelt," Mistpaw meowed, her mew dripping with honey-sweet sarcasm. "But it seems most sensible that we should start with catmint, since it's closer. Also, is there another place to collect comfrey? We would have to travel through ShadowClan or WindClan territory to get it, and RiverClan is already hostile towards WindClan."

Leafpelt tilted his head to the side. "That's true. Whitepaw, is there another place to find comfrey?"

Whitepaw gritted his teeth. *Annoying furball!* "No, and besides, medicine cats are allowed to travel across Clan territory as long as they stay three fox-lengths away from the lake."

"But we aren't medicine cats," Mistpaw pointed out. "What will

RiverClan think?"

"Stop arguing! Let's get this over with!" Whitepaw growled, scraping his claws against the ground.

Mistpaw opened her mouth to speak, but Leafpelt shushed her by slapping his tail over her mouth. "Alright, let's go," Leafpelt meowed, shooting Mistpaw a stern look.

As the three cats walked deeper into the forest, Whitepaw couldn't help notice that it seemed warmer than usual. It was true; newleaf was finally there. As Whitepaw padded towards the training arena, relishing the warmth of newleaf, he suddenly felt teeth sink into his scruff.

"Hey!" Whitepaw turned around and shook his pelt out, looking at his attacker. *Mistpaw!* "What are you doing?" he snapped. "Do you *want* to make me annoyed?"

"What's the commotion over here?" Leafpelt was walking towards them from the behind. "Mistpaw, what's going on?"

"He almost fell into a rabbit burrow!" Mistpaw wailed. "I was just trying to help him, and he started growling at me!"

For the first time, Whitepaw noticed the large, dark rabbit hole right in front of him. *Why do I have to mess up in front of Mistpaw? Now she'll find another way to annoy me!*

"Whitepaw?" Leafpelt was staring at him. "Would you like to apologize?"

"Sorry, Mistpaw," Whitepaw muttered. "And thanks, I guess." Mistpaw's only reply was a disbelieving sniff as she scouted in front.

When the group finally reached the garden, Whitepaw's tail drooped. "There's not a lot of catmint," he mewed regretfully. He shook the thought away. *We won't be needing it as much anyways*. They collected as much catmint as they had left, which wasn't much. Whitepaw held the catmint carefully in his mouth, cautious not to absorb the delicious flavor rushing from the leaves. After

they started towards the RiverClan border, Whitepaw couldn't help but notice Mistpaw flicking her tail to and fro nervously, and Leafpelt giving her a reassuring flick on the nose with his tail-tip. *She doesn't want any trouble.*

Halfway through WindClan territory, Mistpaw opened her mouth to taste the air and suddenly stiffened. "WindClan patrol," she murmured in a low voice.

Almost on cue, a WindClan patrol appeared on the moor. "What are you doing here?" a ginger tom asked, his amber eyes narrowing suspiciously.

"We're on our way to collect herbs, Crouchheart," Leafpelt replied in a calm voice. "Do you have a problem with that?" Although his voice was level, Whitepaw could hear challenge in it as well.

A pale gray-and-white tom stepped up, his blue eyes flashing with menace. "How do we know you haven't been hunting on our land?" Whitepaw recognized Gorsefur from the gathering.

"We haven't been stealing your measly rabbits, you mouse-brain!" Mistpaw spat before Leafpelt could reply.

"Mistpaw," Leafpelt warned in a low voice. Turning back to the WindClan cats, he held Gorsefur's gaze. "Just let us go through your territory. We must collect comfrey," he meowed coolly.

A small dark gray tom growled, the noise rumbling deep in his throat. Gorsefur slapped his tail on his mouth. "You can pass," Gorsefur snapped. "But if we find any fresh-kill you caught on our land, you can count on it to be reported to Springstar."

"You won't find any," Leafpelt returned calmly. As the patrol stepped aside to let them pass, Whitepaw felt a rush of gratitude and relief. *Thank StarClan!*

"All this for a measly bunch of leaves!" Whitepaw heard Mistpaw growl under her breath. He opened his mouth to retort a stingy comeback, but thought better of it and closed his mouth. *It's not my*

problem that Mistpaw is grumpy, after all.

Luckily, the three cats didn't encounter any more trouble as Whitepaw crammed comfrey into his mouth.

"I don't know how you stand this taste," Mistpaw mumbled around the mouthful of herbs. The WindClan patrol didn't return, to Whitepaw's relief.

When they finally reached the camp once again, Heatherfur rushed up to them. "Where have you been?" she mewed urgently.

Whitepaw dropped the herbs at Heatherfur's feet and tipped his head to one side, confused. "Is there any trouble?"

Heatherfur gazed at Whitepaw, the usual calmness in her blue eyes gone. "Whitepaw, Scorchfire's has greencough!"

Chapter 6

Whitepaw stared at Heatherfur, dumbfounded. He opened his mouth to speak, but nothing but a croak came out. Finally, he managed to mew, "How bad is it?" He already knew the answer.

"It's serious," Heatherfur meowed. Finally looking down at the herbs they had collected, her face fell. "That's all the catmint you could find?"

Whitepaw lowered his head, not meeting Heatherfur's gaze. "Most of the catmint has been damaged by leaf-bare. It'll be awhile before it starts flourishing again."

Heatherfur nodded, picking up the catmint carefully. "Well, we have to manage with what we have," she murmured through clenched teeth.

Whitepaw followed Heatherfur into the medicine den, and almost immediately the sour scent of greencough radiating off Scorchfire. The fire-colored tom's face looked sunken and weary, his amber eyes unusually clouded and unseeing. Whitepaw had to pad closer in order to watch Scorchfire's flank rising up and down.

As Heatherfur tried to feed Scorchfire the remains of the catmint, he feebly pushed away the leaves with his paw. "Save it for someone else that needs it more," he rasped.

"Swallow it," Heatherfur ordered, this time shoving it into his mouth. Scorchfire didn't have time to react as he swallowed the leaves.

Whitepaw watched with a horrible feeling of dread rising up in his chest. *What if Scorchfire dies?* He pushed the thought away. Just then, Featherwing burst into the den.

"How's Scorchfire?" she mewed urgently. Whitepaw wrenched his gaze away from his father and stared at Featherwing, not

knowing what to say.

"I don't think he's getting better," Whitepaw mewed sadly. "But he managed to keep down the catmint, and it doesn't look like he's getting worse, either."

Featherwing sighed, her blue eyes full of grief. "What if . . ." she lowered her voice, "he dies?"

"Hush!" Heatherfur was suddenly by Featherwing's side, brushing her pelt comfortingly. "You musn't let Scorchfire hear you say that. He's a strong cat."

Featherwing looked up at her daughter. "Does that mean that he'll survive?"

Heatherfur sighed. "What can I say? He's a strong cat, yes, but he's also old. If he were younger, maybe he could pull through, but this is a terrible bout of sickness that hit him. He doesn't have much strength to fight it now, and I don't know if he'll be able to come through. Until then . . ." she hesitated. "You may want to say your goodbyes soon."

Featherwing slumped, as if not able to respond to that. "Alright. Thank you, Heatherfur and Whitepaw." She padded gloomily out of the den, her tail brushing her hind legs. Scorchfire wheezed from behind them, then paused, drifting into an uncomfortable sleep once again.

Whitepaw watched silently. "He'll get better, right?" he finally asked. *He's got to be! Scorchfire's the strongest cat I know!*

Heatherfur sniffed Scorchfire carefully, refusing to meet Whitepaw's gaze. "I hate to say this, Whitepaw . . . but I cannot do anything more. He is in the paws of StarClan now." *Oh StarClan, please spare my father's life!* he begged silently.

"Couldn't I make a coltsfoot poultice for him?" Whitepaw asked urgently. "It is good for helping a cat's breathing, right? And what about poppy seeds?"

Heatherfur shook her head, laying her tail gently on Whitepaw's

flank. "I already gave him coltsfoot while you were out scouting for herbs, and it won't help cure greencough anyways. Poppy seeds would reduce the pain, but keeping him conscious is the only way of knowing if he's starting to get better — or worse."

"Who will be deputy until then?"

"I'm sure Twigstar will figure something out. She could choose a responsible cat to take over Scorchfire's duties, but as you might know, Twigstar has been a deputy before. She can take over it if she truly wishes."

"What will we tell Flamefeather?" Flamefeather was Scorchfire's son from Featherwing's first litter.

"I will tell him," Heatherfur mewed briskly. "I am his sister, but I don't plan on telling him it's serious. He'll have enough time to realize that if Scorchfire gets worse."

With a jolt, Whitepaw remembered that Heatherfur was also part of Featherwing's first litter. "He won't die, will he?" Whitepaw murmured.

Heatherfur angled her ears toward Scorchfire. "We have to be quiet," she hissed. Her voice softening, she added, "I'll try my best. Until then, you don't have to worry." By the anxious note in her voice, Whitepaw doubted that she was truly confident.

Whitepaw nodded, though a trickle of unease ran through his pelt. "I hope he gets better soon," he meowed finally.

"So do I," Heatherfur answered, pressing her ears on Scorchfire's pelt, listening for his breathing. After awhile, her face became grave. "His breathing is shallow, and it's slowing," she reported. "Whitepaw," she added quietly. "I don't have much hope for him . . ."

Whitepaw stiffened. "No!" he rasped. "He *must* get better. He's my father! Certainly StarClan will spare him!"

"StarClan cannot control everything, Whitepaw," Heatherfur

mewed quietly. "You should get some sleep, Whitepaw . . ."

"But—" Whitepaw protested.

"Now!" his mentor hissed sharply. "No matter what happens, you are still my apprentice, and I know what's best for you. I may need your help tomorrow, so I need you to get a good sleep tonight, alright?"

Whitepaw sank down into his nest. *I know that Heatherfur just wants to help me, but . . .*

I hope she knows that I won't be getting that much sleep tonight.

Chapter 7

"Whitepaw! Whitepaw!" Whitepaw felt a paw prodding him urgently and forced his eyes open. He made out Heatherfur's outline in the still-dark sky.

"What?" he mewed sleepily. "It's not even dawn yet, Heatherfur. Go back to sleep—"

"Whitepaw, Scorchfire's dying!" Heatherfur cried urgently, prodding him once again. "Get up, get up!"

Scorchfire's dying? All the rush of events suddenly came back to Whitepaw — gathering herbs with Leafpelt and Mistpaw, Scorchfire becoming sick, Heatherfur telling him to go to sleep . . .

Immediately, Whitepaw scrambled out of his nest and stared at the fire-colored tom wheezing next to him. *Scorchfire!* "Don't go, Scorchfire!" he begged. "I'll do everything I can to help you! I'll find more catmint and coltsfoot, and I'll ask all the other medicine cats to help you! You just *can't* die!

"There's nothing you can do, Whitepaw," Heatherfur whispered, her voice breaking.

Scorchfire purred hoarsely, his voice cracking. "I'm . . . I'm sorry Whitepaw . . ." He went into another wheezing fit. "Please go get . . . Brightpaw and. . . Featherwing . . ."

Whitepaw nodded urgently and dashed into the apprentices den. "Brightpaw! Brightpaw!" He whispered.

Brightpaw stirred. "What?" she mewed sleepily.

"Brightpaw, come quick! Scorchfire's dying!" Whitepaw cried. Brightpaw's eyes widened and she bounded out of the den with Whitepaw. "Go to the medicine cat den," he told his sister. "I'll get Featherwing." Whitepaw dashed away to the nursery before

Brightpaw could object.

"Featherwing! Featherwing!" Featherwing opened her eyes. Cold grief twisted at his belly when she looked into her dull eyes. "Scorchfire's dying!" Featherwing stared at him blankly, and then her eyes widened in horror. She raced out of the den, with Whitepaw by her side.

Brightpaw was already there when they arrived. Featherwing threw herself into the den. "Don't go!" Featherwing pleaded. "Please, Scorchfire, just hang on a little longer!" She stared desperately at Heatherfur. "Can't you do something?" She asked desperately. "Anything? Please!"

Heatherfur shook her head slowly before dipping her head. "I've given him catmint and coltsfoot, and I've given him fresh moss to drink from. There's nothing else I can do for him. StarClan is calling for Scorchfire. I cannot change his destiny."

Scorchfire twined his tail with Featherwing's for a moment before staring at Whitepaw and Brightpaw. "Whitepaw . . . Brightpaw . . ." He rasped. "My only regret is that I will never see my two wonderful kits grow up into a warrior and a medicine cat."

Whitepaw couldn't say anything, and when he glanced over to Brightpaw her eyes were glittering with grief. "Violetbloom, Jaywing . . . have you come for me?" Scorchfire murmured. "I'm ready . . ." Whitepaw's heart ached with grief. Violetbloom and Jaywing had been Scorchfire's parents. They had been killed in a ShadowClan invasion many, many moons ago. Scorchfire let out a long, last breath before going limp, his eyes becoming lifeless and dull. Whitepaw gently licked his eyelids shut.

"He was an honorable warrior," Heatherfur whispered, her voice full of grief. Whitepaw suddenly remembered that Heatherfur was part of Scorchfire and Featherwing's first litter, along with Flamefeather.

Whitepaw murmured agreement, dipping his head. "Should we go tell Twigstar and Flamefeather?" Dawn was approaching quickly, and the sky began to get brighter. Heatherfur nodded gratefully

before licking Featherwing's ear in the process to calm her down.

Whitepaw made his way to Twigstar's den. "Twigstar?" he mumbled.

Twigstar stirred. "What is it, Whitepaw?"

"Scorchfire's dead." Whitepaw shivered. Even when he said it, it sounded . . . unreal.

All of the sleepiness and wariness had vanished from Twigstar's eyes, and nothing except grief shone in the amber eyes. "I knew his time was coming soon," she murmured. "He was an honorable deputy and warrior, and he would've made a fine leader." She got up slowly and padded toward the medicine cat den. Whitepaw then went off to find Flamefeather in the warriors den.

Flamefeather wasn't asleep. Instead, his ears were prickedand his eyes were wide open. "He's dead, isn't he?" Flamefeather murmured. "I heard the commotion immediately, and I heard Scorchfire's name." His eyes glistened with grief.

Whitepaw nodded. "He's in the medicine den." He wearily padded away without another word, Flamefeather trailing behind him.

As a pale violet light shone through the camp, Whitepaw thought he could see a pale line of Scorchfire sprinting through the camp, light as a feather. All of the signs of age had disappeared, and he looked young and free again. As Whitepaw padded over to get a closer look, he suddenly disappeared.

I hope you're happy in StarClan. I promise, Scorchfire, I will never give up, and I will do everything to make sure that I'll be a medicine cat you can be proud of.

Chapter 8

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather here beneath the Highledge for a Clan meeting," Twigstar called. Her amber eyes were unusually clouded with grief. Almost none of the cats heard her. Mouseclaw bounded up next to her, his hazel eyes flashing with annoyance.

Stupid, arrogant Mouseclaw! Whitepaw thought, annoyed. *You're not even deputy; stop acting like you're leader already!*

Once all was silent, Twigstar curled up her tail in mild amusement, though she still looked weary. "Thank you, Mouseclaw," she meowed. "But remember that *I* am leader." Briarheart let out a *mrrow* of laughter beside Whitepaw. Mouseclaw stiffened but padded down from the Highledge.

"Many of you do not know this yet, but last night Scorchfire died. A hushed silence fell through the camp. "He was an honorable deputy, and he would've made a wonderful leader. He served his Clan well." Twigstar's voice cracked with grief. "But," she continued, "as you all know, we must appoint a new deputy." She flicked her tail at Torntail and Sootfang, and they carried Scorchfire's limp body to the Highledge. "I say these words before the body of Scorchfire, that the spirits of our warrior ancestors may hear and approve of my choice. The new deputy of ThunderClan will be Watercloud." Murmurs of approval rippled through the Clan.

"Yay, Watercloud!" Toadkit squeaked from the nursery. Watercloud purred.

"Thank you, Twigstar," he mewed. "I am honored to be ThunderClan's deputy, and I promise to serve my Clan as its deputy until my last breath." He dipped his head towards Twigstar. As cats began to pad away, mewing excitedly, Whitepaw noticed one cat that didn't look pleased at all. In fact, his face showed nothing but hate for Watercloud. *Mouseclaw.* Of course. He had been hoping for the position of deputy but was never given it. Whitepaw felt a

glimmer of satisfaction. He had never liked Mouseclaw. Mouseclaw was a strong, young, prideful cat, but every time something happened, his opinion was to battle.

Whitepaw felt a glimmer of relief. The efficient gray tom would be well as a deputy. Twigstar had chosen well.

"Whitepaw," a mew came from behind him. *Heatherfur.* Whitepaw regained his balance. Heatherfur was sitting neatly behind him, her sky-blue eyes unusually darkened dull with grief. "It's time to get back to work. Do you want some poppy seeds to get a good sleep? I gave Featherwing some . . ."

Whitepaw considered it for a moment. A good sleep did sound nice. But all the same . . . "No," he decided. "I'll be fine. Thanks, Heatherfur, but you look like you need more of a nap than I do."

Heatherfur let out a quiet sigh. "I know. But as the Clan's medicine cat, I have a responsibility. Plus, I should add some marigold to Dustpool's ear, and Leafpelt sprained his leg yesterday, and I need to restock the herb stock . . ." her mew trailed off.

"Don't worry," Whitepaw answered, raising his head. "A nap won't hurt. You taught me how to treat sprained legs and cuts. The least I could do is restock the herb piles. Come on," he added when Heatherfur hesitated. "You're mouse-brained to think that you don't need a rest, of all cats. I'll take care of everything."

"As your mentor, Whitepaw, I'd be neglecting your training," Heatherfur murmured quietly.

"Nonsense," Whitepaw meowed briskly. "Twigstar would understand." He paused. "And I'm sure that Scorchfire would want the same."

Heatherfur let out a long, exasperated puff of air. "You have the spirit of your father," she mewed. "Fine, just a quick nap. But if *anything* is wrong, wake me up immediately," she added. Whitepaw dipped his head, still hollow with grief. Whitepaw and his mentor padded back to the medicine cat den. As Heatherfur settled in her nest with a drowsy mew, Whitepaw glanced around the den.

Leafpelt was nowhere to be seen. *Stupid furball.* He was supposed to be in the den, waiting for Heatherfur to apply the poultice on his leg.

"Heatherfur, where's Leafpelt?" Whitepaw asked. Heatherfur gave no answer. *She's already asleep,* Whitepaw thought. *She must've been really tired.*

"Need to make poultice . . . Leafpelt . . . Scorchfire . . . herb stocking . . . cut ear . . . Dustpool . . . need to help . . ." Heatherfur murmured in her sleep. Whiteheart sighed. *Can't wake her. Guess I'll have to find Leafpelt on my own.* He padded outside.

"Does anyone know where Leafpelt went?" He called.

"He's gone out training with Mistpaw," Watercloud replied. "Why?" Whitepaw gritted his teeth, annoyed. *After Heatherfur told him he was confined to the camp? What a bird-brain!*

"Oh, nothing too—" Whitepaw started. Just then, Leafpelt came dashing into the clearing as fast as his sprained leg would allow.

"Heatherfur! Whitepaw! Mistpaw fell out of a tree!"

Oh, no! Whitepaw froze. "Heatherfur!" He screeched. "Wake up!" Whitepaw heard a grunt before Heatherfur lumbered out of the den sleepily.

"Oh my whiskers, Whitepaw, what is it?" Heatherfur asked.

"Mistpaw fell out of a tree!" Whitepaw cried. Heatherfur's head jerked up, all the sleepiness in her eyes gone. Not bothering to ask any more questions, Heatherfur scrambled back into the den.

"Grab cobwebs, marigold, and some leaf wraps!" Heatherfur growled, racing off. Whitepaw grasped some of each into his jaw and followed, struggling to keep up with her. *Where in StarClan did Heatherfur learn how to run this fast?* Whitepaw thought.

From behind them, he heard Leafpelt call, "She's close to the training arena, next to the large oak tree!" Whitepaw wanted to tell Heatherfur, but his mouth was crammed with herbs and Heatherfur

seemed to hear Leafpelt anyways because she swerved left in the forest towards the training arena. Whitepaw followed, making sure that all the herbs were clamped tightly in his mouth. In the distance, he could make out a faint shape of Mistpaw sprawled on the grassy grounds, along with Thornear and Brightpaw next to her. As they approached, Heatherfur skidded to a stop next to Mistpaw, Whitepaw next to her.

She bent down and examined Mistpaw. "Try to stand up," Heatherfur ordered. Mistpaw stood up but then fell back down.

"My foreleg hurts!" She wailed in anguish. Heatherfur glanced at the leg. Whitepaw cocked his head. Her leg was unusually sprawled in a strange direction. *No! Could it be? Could Mistpaw have broken her leg?* Whitepaw thought.

Heatherfur poked it with her paw, and Mistpaw yowled with pain. "That hurts!" she mewed.

Heatherfur sighed, turning towards Whitepaw. "Wrap a leaf around it tightly," she ordered. Whitepaw did as he was told, grimacing when Mistpaw let out cries of pain.

"Help Mistpaw get back to camp," Heatherfur ordered to Whitepaw and Brightpaw. They hauled Mistpaw up. *Good thing that Mistpaw didn't get hurt farther away from the camp, or else it might take moons to get her back,* Whitepaw thought privately. Thornear scouted around in the front, while Heatherfur supported Mistpaw's rear.

When they got back to camp, cats immediately let out large cries of distress. "Oh, Mistpaw, my beautiful kit!" Twigstar cried, rushing towards to meet Mistpaw. "What happened?"
Mistpaw opened her mouth to speak, but nothing came out. *Probably because she's still recovering from the shock,* Whitepaw thought.

"Get her to the medicine cat den," Heatherfur ordered. The three cats steered Mistpaw to the medicine den, and Mistpaw crouched into an empty nest, letting out a soft, relieved sigh.

"Get her some water," Whitepaw added. Heatherfur gave Whitepaw a tiny nod of approval as Brightpaw raced back in the den with a dripping wad of moss. Whitepaw let the water trickle into Mistpaw's mouth.

"Oh, that feels so much better," Mistpaw murmured. "Thank you . . ." she snuggled in the nest, dozing off immediately.

As her breathing began to get slower and more relaxed, Whitepaw turned to Heatherfur. "Heatherfur, what's going to happen to her?" he murmured. "Will she be able to . . ."

Heatherfur turned from the thyme poultice she was mixing. "Walk? Yes, she will." Whitepaw relaxed. He couldn't imagine the bright, energetic apprentice not being able to move ever again. "But she will have to stay here for a moon or so while her leg mends."

Whitepaw froze. "A moon? That's so long! She'll miss so much training!"

"Leafpelt will understand," Heatherfur soothed. "He can be scatterbrained, but he's not stupid. He would rather have a healthy apprentice with all four of her working legs in a moon than having a tired apprentice with only three working legs next sunrise."

Whitepaw licked his paw, drawing it behind his ears to give his head a good wash. "I suppose," he sighed. "But Mistpaw's going to be devastated."

"Mistpaw has to accept it," Heatherfur mewed firmly. "I'm not going to say she'll like staying in here, but it's the only way for her to ever walk with four good legs again."

Whitepaw dipped his head. "True."

Just then, Twigstar scrambled into the den. "Is she alright?" she cried, suddenly lowering her voice as she saw Mistpaw sleeping. Heatherfur continued mixing the poultice, lost in thought.

Whitepaw padded up to Twigstar "She'll have to stay in the medicine cat den for a moon or so for her leg to heal," he murmured in Twigstar's ear. "Don't make it harder for Mistpaw by acting so

distressed. She'll be fine."

Twigstar's eyes flew wide with shock. "But—but—what about her training?" she stammered, forgetting to keep her voice down. Mistpaw started to stir.

Whitepaw ushered her out quickly. "Keep your voice down," he hissed. "Mistpaw musn't see her mother like this. She trusts you. If you become mouse-brained, she may follow your actions. And as for her training, Leafpelt will understand, and Mistpaw must see that it is the only way she'll heal. Or would you want her to stay three-legged forever?" he added dryly.

Twigstar opened his mouth, obviously about to make a sharp retort, but then obviously thought better of it and closed her mouth. Her whiskers twitched with frustration, but she seemed like she was trying to stay calm.

"Alright," she finally replied.

Whitepaw glanced around quickly. "We've got to keep quiet, alright?"

Twigstar nodded, but he could tell that she was struggling to stay calm now. As she padded away gloomily, Whitepaw stared after her. *Poor Twigstar She must be going through a lot right now. And Mistpaw will hate to have her warrior training cut off by one moon.*

Whitepaw padded back to the medicine den wearily. *As a medicine cat, I'm supposed to help cats . . . but I didn't do anything to help Scorchfire or Mistpaw.*

If I had been a better medicine cat . . . maybe this wouldn't have happened.

Chapter 9

Whitepaw woke up with a start, glancing around at his surroundings. Light gray fur caught his eye. That wasn't Heatherfur's pelt. With a jolt, Whitepaw realized it was Mistpaw. Memories flooded back into his mind, and he groaned, closing his eyes, trying to block them out.

"Whitepaw," a soft voice came from behind him. He opened his eyes and glanced at Heatherfur. "It's time to start working."

Whitepaw lifted his head wearily, but crawled out of his nest. Tip-toeing over to the herb stocks, he tried his best not to wake Mistpaw, but she stirred anyways.

"Where am I?" she asked curiously, sniffing at the feathers surrounding her nest. Wrinkling her nose suddenly, she added, "And why does it smell like disgusting herbs?"

Whitepaw rolled his eyes. Before he could explain, Heatherfur beat him to the punch. "You broke your leg, Mistpaw," she explained gently. "That's why you're in the medicine den."

Mistpaw tried to stand up, but collapsed. "Why didn't I get better, though?" she wailed. "Leafpelt broke his leg, and it took only a few days to heal."

"Leafpelt sprained his leg, and sprains are much easier to heal," Heatherfur mewed soothingly. "Mistpaw, broken legs can never get better overnight. It may take a moon or two to fully heal your leg."

Mistpaw's eyes widened in horror. "What about my training? Now . . . " Her voice trailed off.

"Mistpaw, Leafpelt will understand," Heatherfur meowed. "He's not mad at you.

"You'll be fine within a moon's rest," Whitepaw added

reassuringly.

"Fine?" Mistpaw squeaked. Whitepaw flinched. Her gaze had suddenly gone from confused to cold. "Fine?" she hissed. "What about my training? What about my friends? What about Twigstar and Watercloud? What about —" her voice cracked. "What about my life?"

Whitepaw hung his head. As much as he disliked Mistpaw, he couldn't help but feel pangs of pain and sorrow for the older apprentice.

Heatherfur gazed at Mistpaw. "It'll be hard, I know, but it's the best way for your leg to get better."

"I'm never going to become a warrior with a broken leg!" Mistpaw wailed, oblivious of Heatherfur's kind words.

Heatherfur stiffened, and crouched down next to Mistpaw. "Never say that!" she hissed. Her voice softening, she added, "Injuries didn't stop me from becoming important to the Clan."

Mistpaw looked at her questioningly. "What?"

Heatherfur sighed. "When I was a kit, I had always wanted to be a warrior. And when I became an apprentice, I was a warrior apprentice. But I always strayed off, collecting leaves, herbs, and flowers instead of hunting or fighting, and I insisted on spending every moment of my life with Spottedwing, the medicine cat before me.

"One day, I fell out of a tree, just like you. I was terrified. I had to spend moons upon moons in the medicine cat den, because unlike you, I had broken two legs." Mistpaw gasped. "So I dedicated all my time to Spottedwing, learning all about herbs, being a medicine cat, sharing dreams with StarClan . . . I loved that idea. I also wanted to be a warrior. But that was solved soon enough."

"What happened?" Mistpaw squeaked, full of awe.

Heatherfur's tail drooped, as if she was experiencing the memory right there and then. "My mentor, Torntail, who was called Birchtail

at the time, refused to continue mentoring me. He said I was too obsessed with being a medicine cat, and he wanted me to pursue my dream, because I would never be truly happy as a warrior."

"Torntail?" This time it was Whitepaw that was in awe. "*Torntail* was your mentor?" he tried envisioning the grumpy white tom young, with an apprentice to train. He couldn't.

"That's right," Heatherfur meowed, dipping her head. "Before you say that what he did was heartless, let me just tell you that's not true. Birchtail — Torntail — believed that he was doing what was best for me, and he simply wanted me to be happy."

"So what happened?" Mistpaw pressed.

Heatherfur's eyes brightened. "He was right. I asked Spottedwing to be my mentor, and she graciously accepted. My apprenticeship was not as long as most medicine cat apprenticeships, since I already knew all the herbs. Within two moons, I was a full medicine cat. And a good thing for that," she mewed.

"Why?" Whitepaw pricked his ears. He had never heard this story before, and he was intrigued

Heatherfur's eyes darkened. "Not a quarter moon after I had become a full medicine cat when Spottedwing died in a fire that blazed through ThunderClan territory while she was trying to grab herbs for her Clan." Heatherfur ducked her head. "Because I refused to," she whispered. "I didn't believe risking my life to collect herbs was worth the price. But it nearly killed me with grief when I watched Spottedwing's body get lowered down." She finished the story with a sigh.

"Wow," Mistpaw murmured as she hauled herself back into her nest.

Not noticing Mistpaw, Heatherfur looked up at Whitepaw, eyes glistening with sorrow. "I've searched and searched in StarClan, but I never find her," she rasped. "But I can't bring myself to believe that my mentor would be in the Place of No Stars."

Without even waiting for Whitepaw to answer, she got to her feet. "It's time for the half-moon medicine cat meeting, Whitepaw," she meowed briskly, her old voice coming back. "Let's go."

Chapter 10

Whitepaw's paws tingled with excitement with every step. He was finally going to his first half-moon meeting!

Heatherfur glanced at him. "Don't say much about Mistpaw, or her injury," she warned. "Twigstar can decide if she wants to say that at the gathering."

Eager to change the subject, Whitepaw glanced around his surroundings. "Are you sure Dawnlight will manage alright without us?" he asked. While the two medicine cats had gone to the meeting, Heatherfur had put Dawnlight in charge.

"She'll be fine," Heatherfur replied. "She was once my apprentice for a little while, and she knows the herbs she can use. Besides, I told Mistpaw what she could use for her leg — comfrey to help a broken leg and soothing wounds, dried oak leaf to stop infection, and even though it doesn't seem like she's in shock anymore, thyme to calm her down."

Whitepaw nodded. "Yes. But what if something happens while we're gone?"

"Dawnlight will take care of it," Heatherfur soothed. "She's a very reliable cat."

Whitepaw didn't ask any more questions as they padded along with the grassy fields. When they finally reached the large, stone rock where the other medicine cats met, Whitepaw recognized the large, bulky shape of Kestrelspring and the small silhouette of Applepelt.

"Hello," purred Applepelt. Her distinctive green eyes darted around the clearing as if she expected another cat to jump out at her. "Whitepaw, isn't it? It's good to see you again."

Whitepaw dipped his head in a formal greeting. "Good to see you too, Applepelt. You look well."

"As do you," she responded.

"This is all well," Heatherfur interrupted briskly, "but where are Mothshine and Willowfur, and your apprentice, Applepelt?"

This time it was not Applepelt that spoke, but Kestrelspring. "They're waiting for us up ahead," he meowed. "Perhaps we should get going."

"Yes, we should," Heatherfur meowed, watching the other cats rising. As they walked towards the Moonpool, Whitepaw heard Heatherfur ask, "Where's Softpaw, Applepelt?"

"Taking care of an ill cat with greencough," Applepelt replied. Lowering her voice, she added, "Even though greenleaf is coming, greencough is still here."

"Oh, I'm sorry," Heatherfur apologized, her voice softening with sympathy. "Which cat?"

"Stoatcloud," Applepelt answered. Lowering her voice to a whisper, Whitepaw had to strain his ears to hear her. "She's in the paws of StarClan now. I would've stayed, but Softpaw is still an apprentice, and she's not yet skilled at interpreting dreams from StarClan."

"We had another cat with greencough, too," Heatherfur mewed, her mew suddenly slurred with grief. "Scorchfire, our deputy. He died just a few sunrises ago."

"He was an honorable cat," Kestrelspring put in. "Who's the new deputy?"

"Watercloud," Heatherfur replied. She opened her mouth to say something but was interrupted by Mothshine.

"Great StarClan, there you are!" Mothshine exclaimed. "Willowfur and I have been waiting moons for you!" Though her words were abrupt, Whitepaw detected a hint of warmth behind them.

"This is my apprentice, Whitepaw," Heatherfur introduced. "You already met him at the Gathering." Murmurs of approval rippled through small crowd of medicine cats. "It's time to begin the ceremony."

Whitepaw's paws trembled with anticipation. He was finally going to be a *real* medicine cat apprentice. "Whitepaw, is it your wish to enter the mysterious of StarClan as a medicine cat?"

"It is," Whitepaw responded.

"Then come forward." As Whitepaw stepped forward, Heatherfur continued. "Warriors of StarClan, I present you with this apprentice. They have chosen the path of a medicine cat. Grant them your wisdom and insight so that they may understand your ways and heal their Clan in accordance with your will."

Whitepaw met Heatherfur's gaze and saw pride shining in her eyes. "Crouch down and drink from the Moonpool." Carefully, Whitepaw followed Heatherfur's instructions and crouched down to the cold earth. Gently, he drank from the Moonpool. It tasted like liquid starshine, icy and shining. He was faintly aware of the medicine cats around him doing the same as he closed his eyes and was swept into darkness.

Whitepaw opened his eyes once again. He was on a grassy field, the blue skies stretching overhead. He closed his eyes and purred, enjoying the warm sunshine on his pelt.

Almost suddenly, however, the skies got darker, and Whitepaw was transported to a lush, forest-like scene. Almost immediately, Whitepaw smelled the stench of smoke and peered into the bushes. Fire raged through the forest, and Whitepaw could hear cats screaming and yowling for help in the distance. "Wait!" Whitepaw yowled. "Where are you? Can I help you?"

There was no reply. A strange voice with a heavy accent suddenly pounded in his ears.

"When fire arrives, the mist must fall and leave behind the white water."

Whitepaw opened his mouth in a soundless wail, but before he could, his eyes jolted open. With a sigh of relief, he realized he was back at the Moonpool with the other medicine cats, who were also slowly rising from their positions.

"Why does StarClan have to be so *vague*?" Kestrelspring complained.

None of the other medicine cats spoke, but Whitepaw guessed they were as frustrated as he was. *"When fire arrives, the mist must fall and leave behind the white water"*? What did that mean? How was Whitepaw supposed to decipher that?

"Any important things to share before we part?" Heatherfur finally asked. Everyone shook their heads. "Well," she added more crisply, "may StarClan light your path until we next meet."

Whitepaw and the others murmured agreement as they separated.

Heatherfur and Whitepaw padded silently across the marshy grounds, thoughts swirling in Whitepaw's mind. "So, did you have any dreams?" Heatherfur asked. Whitepaw hesitated. Heatherfur had told him that medicine cats only shared their dreams after they knew what it meant. "It's okay, you can tell me," she meowed reassuringly.

"Well . . ." Whitepaw shifted uncomfortably. "I was in a grassy field, and it was nice and sunny. Suddenly, the sky darkened and heavy winds started to blow through and clouds formed, and I was transported to what looked like ThunderClan territory. I smelled smoke and saw fire. I even heard cats in the distance howling or help. I asked if they needed help, but no one responded. Finally, I heard this voice saying, "*"When fire arrives, the mist must fall and leave behind the white water.*" he finished. Heatherfur was silent for a moment. *Does she think I'm mouse-brained?* Whitepaw thought. *I wouldn't blame her. I think I'm mouse-brained myself. Why would she, of all cats, believe me?*

To Whitepaw's surprise, she was nodding. "That has the distinctive ring of a StarClan prophecy to it, Whitepaw," she answered.

"But what does it *mean*?" Whitepaw exclaimed, suddenly

exasperated with his mentor. "Why does StarClan have to be so *vague*? Aren't medicine cats supposed to interpret signs from StarClan?" he realized who he was talking to and stopped abruptly.

"It's okay, Whitepaw," Heatherfur mewed gently. "Every apprentice has this trouble. Prophecies and signs are very different, young one. However . . ." she paused to think. "That could be warning us of a fire approaching."

"Like danger from Twolegs or ShadowClan?" Whitepaw asked curiously, his eyes rounding.

Heatherfur shook her head. "No, a literal fire. Fires are often common in greenleaf when it's especially hot. A fire many seasons ago destroyed ThunderClan once," she meowed, her eyes becoming distant.

"How do you know?" Whitepaw questioned.

Heatherfur glanced at Whitepaw. "I was born right before it happened."

"Oh." Whitepaw looked down, heat spreading on his cheeks. "I-I'm sorry."

"It's fine," Heatherfur answered, her voice becoming sad. "Anyways," she added briskly, her voice becoming more abrupt again. "I'll tell Twigstar that we should let more cats in each patrol, just for safety reasons, and tell all the cats to keep a sharp lookout."

"What about the other Clans?" Whitepaw asked inquisitively.

Heatherfur's gaze slid to Whitepaw's for a moment. "That's sharp thinking, my apprentice. When I tell Twigstar, I'll make sure to add that she should warn the other Clans. She can warn them or not; after all, it's not up to ThunderClan to take care of the other Clans."

They had reached the bramble entrance. Whitepaw ducked to make sure that his head didn't skim the brambles. The clearing was silent, and quiet snores echoed around the camp.

Whitepaw shivered. He had never seen the camp so quiet before.

The clearing was usually so loud, with bustling warriors and apprentices complaining about the elders.

"A little scary, isn't it?"

Whitepaw whirled around. "Heatherfur!" he exclaimed, then, remembering to lower his voice, he added, "you scared me!"

"Did you forget I was right behind you?" Heatherfur teased, amusement glimmering in her eyes. "Never mind. Go to your nest. I'll discuss my dream and your's with Twigstar."

"But— " Whitepaw started. Heatherfur held up a paw to stop him, shaking her head.

"You're not as experienced as I am," she warned. "I'll take care of it. When you're a full medicine cat, you can share with Twigstar just as I do."

Whitepaw slumped, feeling foolish. "Alright," he muttered. "When will you be back?"

"As long as it takes for me to finish discussing it with her," Heatherfur replied crisply. Cuffing his ears gently, she started padding towards Twigstar's den. Whitepaw walked back to the medicine cat den.

"Ow!" Whitepaw heard as he accidentally stepped on something plumy and fluffy. "Get off my tail!"

Whitepaw rolled his eyes. "Sorry, Mistpaw," he growled through gritted teeth. He had completely forgotten he had a denmate other than his mentor.

Bracing himself for a sharp retort, Whitepaw found himself holding his breath as he climbed into his nest. To his astonishment, Mistpaw sighed. "I'm sorry," she murmured. "It's just really hard for me to know I'll miss so much training. Jaggedpaw will be a warrior before me, even though we're littermates. And I wanted to be the best warrior ThunderClan has ever seen . . . but how can I do that when I have an injury to worry about all the time?"

Whitepaw hoisted himself, his chin settling on his front paws. "Heatherfur told you that once you've rested, you'll be good as new," he replied, suddenly feeling pitiful for the older apprentice.

"But medicine cats aren't always correct," Mistpaw mewed quietly. Looking up at Whitepaw, she added, "Will I have to train as a medicine cat?" Even in the dark, Whitepaw could tell the thought horrified her, by the way her eyes flashed.

"Don't worry," Whitepaw responded. "I think I'm already a pawful for Heatherfur. She doesn't need two apprentices, after all!"

Mistpaw let out a soft purr of amusement. "Thanks," she meowed after a moment. "I'm going to sleep. Good night, Whitepaw."

"Good night, Mistpaw," Whitepaw murmured, his eyelids suddenly feeling heavy. *Maybe Mistpaw really isn't as bad as she seems*, he thought as he drifted into sleep.

Chapter 11

Whitepaw padded over to the fresh-kill pile, his appetite growing as he reached the pile. *Hunting is good*, he thought approvingly. *The fresh-kill gets fatter and more plentiful every coming day.*

As he neared, Mistpaw looked up from the side of the camp. The young she-cat was now able to drag herself around. "Hey, Whitepaw!" she called cheerfully. "Come share this squirrel with me!"

Whitepaw walked over. She scooted over so Whitepaw could crouch down and take a large bite. "Thanks," he mumbled through a mouthful of squirrel.

"No problem," Mistpaw replied earnestly. "Hungry?"

"Ravenous," Whitepaw responded, gulping down his share of fresh-kill.

Mistpaw took one more bite out of the squirrel and pushed it towards Whitepaw. "You have the rest," she offered. "I'm not hungry."

"Are you sure?" Whitepaw asked. Mistpaw ignored him and stretched out her three uninjured legs, wobbling when she tried the injured leg.

"It still hurts," she complained.

"You need some more comfrey around that leg," Whitepaw advised. "I'll go get you some."

"I'll ask Heatherfur," Mistpaw mewed in a brusque tone, her eyes softening when she met his gaze. "Thank you, Whitepaw." Whitepaw found himself drowning in the depths of her brilliant blue gaze. As she hobbled away, Whitepaw shook himself. *Stop it!* he told himself.

As he entered the medicine den, Mistpaw looked up. "Do you want to go collect herbs?" she murmured. "Heatherfur says I should get some exercise."

Whitepaw looked at her, his mouth suddenly dry. "S-Sure," he stammered. Heatherfur looked up from rearranging herbs.

"When I said to get some exercise, Mistpaw, I didn't say you could do it with my apprentice," she teased gently. "Go ahead, Whitepaw. You need to get some fresh air, and Mistpaw would do with a friend. Besides, we're low on comfrey, feverfew, horsetail, and thyme." Though her voice was light, Whitepaw detected curiosity behind it. *Oh no! Has she found out how excited I am to go with Mistpaw?*

Don't be silly, he scolded himself. How would she know? Whitepaw glanced over his shoulder at Mistpaw. "Let's go," he mewed. Mistpaw nodded. They padded out, Mistpaw hobbling.

"Feverfew, comfrey, horsetail, thyme," Mistpaw recited. "Where's are all those herbs?"

"Feverfew is in the garden near the training arena, along with horsetail. Thyme is near the old Thunderpath the undergrowth, close to the Twoleg path. And comfrey is near the RiverClan border," Whitepaw answered. "We should go to get feverfew and horsetail first, and then thyme, and then comfrey."

"Won't we encounter a WindClan patrol?" Mistpaw fretted.

"Not if we're careful," Whitepaw responded. That seemed to reassure Mistpaw, for she bounded forward, gingerly using her injured leg. Suddenly, feeling a rush of affection for his feisty friend, he bounded after her.

Skidding to a halt near the garden, Mistpaw stared at the leafy stems. "Which one's feverfew and which one's horsetail?" she asked, half to herself.

"Horsetail is the green stems spindly bristles sticking out of it," Whitepaw answered, padding towards it from behind Mistpaw.

"Feverfew is the leafy plant with white petals."

"Wow, there are tons!" Mistpaw mewed in awe.

"Greenleaf's coming," Whitepaw answered with a rush of warmth. "Watch what I do." He bent down and carefully grasped a few horsetail stems, clenching them cautiously, the stingy taste flooding in his mouth. "Take some feverfew," he ordered. "Do the same thing I did, but this time it doesn't matter if you get stems or not, you just need the leaves and roots."

Mistpaw grasped some feverfew in her mouth, her eyes widening as the bitter, irritating taste hit her mouth. "How do you stand this taste?" she gasped with a mouthful of leaves and pulpy roots.

"You get used to it," Whitepaw meowed lightly. Touching his nose to her ear briefly, he added, "And that's the second time you've said that!"

Mistpaw rolled her eyes. "I don't think I'll ever get used to this," she mumbled through a mouthful of leaves, but strangely Whitepaw wasn't offended.

The two apprentices were talking about Heatherfur on the way to get comfrey after they had gotten thyme. "She's nice, isn't she?" Whitepaw prompted. Their pelts brushed, Whitepaw stiffening briefly before relishing the feel of Mistpaw's thick gray pelt against his snowy white fur.

"Yes," Mistpaw agreed, her eyes sparkling, seeming to forget the bitterness of feverfew clamped in her mouth. Glancing at Whitepaw, she added, "She must be a good —" Suddenly, she stiffened abruptly, and she moved her pelt away quickly.

"What is it?" Whitepaw asked, worried. "We're at the border of WindClan," he added, lowering his voice.

"Not WindClan," Mistpaw hissed. "RiverClan patrol." Whitepaw opened his mouth to taste the air. His tail twitched as the pungent, fishy scent of RiverClan hit the roof of his mouth. *She's right. That's not WindClan.*

"Hide!" Mistpaw warned. She slipped into the thick undergrowth. "There are toadstools in here," she whispered, her voice barely audible. She rubbed her pelt all over it. "They'll disguise our scent." As Whitepaw rubbed himself on the toadstools, he couldn't help but feel a flash of admiration for the cunning she-cat.

The scent of RiverClan grew closer, and Whitepaw could hear their pawsteps vibrating the grassy ground.

"Breathe in deeply and sniff, Havenpaw," a low, gruff voice ordered. Whitepaw recognized the voice of Mallowtail, a tom he had met at the Gathering. "Do you scent anything?"

As Havenpaw sniffed, Whitepaw tensed, and he saw Mistpaw twitch her ears anxiously. "I can't scent anything under than the toadstools," she complained. Mallowtail sniffed deeply.

"I can scent a little ThunderClan," he meowed, then sniffing disdainfully. "But that's WindClan's problem. Maybe they've forgotten their own border markers so much that even ThunderClan starts to stray over."

"But WindClan has kept their border markers fresh, and we should be starting to expect WindClan to try to take more territory from us," a she-cat Whitepaw couldn't identify answered mildly. "Should we warn WindClan at the next Gathering about the ThunderClan scents?"

Mallowtail growled. "It's not our problem."

As the three cats padded away, Whitepaw could hear Havenpaw's distant voice. "We should tell Springstar about those toadstools and ask him to remove them."

After they had gone, Mistpaw let out a puff of air, clearly relieved. "I was so sure that they were going to scent us and we would become crow-food!"

"Thanks to the toadstools," Whitepaw responded, blinking warmly at the gray apprentice. "Let's hurry and collect comfrey before a RiverClan comes back. They popped out from their hiding spots and

grasped as much comfrey as they could carry.

"I might as well get used to it," Mistpaw muttered. "I'll be doing a lot of this because of my dumb leg."

Whitepaw glanced sideways at her. He had barely noticed her hobbling. "It's a lot better than a few days ago," he pointed out. "With some more rest, I'm sure you'll be good as new." Mistpaw rolled her eyes.

"Sure," she answered briskly, whisking ahead of him. Whitepaw detected a hint of sadness in her voice and guessed that she wasn't as convinced as she let on.

"Hey, wait up!" he called in forced cheerfulness in an attempt to cheer Mistpaw up. "I'm sure one day when you're a warrior again and you're hunting happily in the forest, I'll be walking around with a mouthful of leaves."

Mistpaw purred in amusement. "I'm looking forward to that." She sighed as the playfulness drained from her gaze. "I know that I'm being grumpy and a pain in the pelt," she finally mewed. "But without being a warrior – and just lying around like this, doing nothing for the Clan – I feel like nothing. Nothing!" she dug her claws deep into the soft ground, a growl rumbling in her throat.

"You're helping to collect herbs," Whitepaw responded mildly. "That's doing something for the Clan."

"You would be able to do it yourself," Mistpaw huffed.

Whitepaw thought about it. It was true. Whitepaw could've done it by himself. "It's true that I could have done this by myself," he finally meowed. "You're right about that. But without you, the Clan is short one warrior. ThunderClan needs all the warriors they can get. So, what you do is hurry and get better. If you think more positively, time will fly, and you'll be a warrior in no time."

Mistpaw brightened a little. "I know it's true," she answered. "I'm very grateful for the fact I didn't permanently injure something." She sounded happier.

"Plus, I bet you'll leap right into your assessment when you get better right after a little catching up, like Leafpelt planned before your accident," Whitepaw replied brightly.

Mistpaw stiffened, and a few roots dropped out of her mouth. Whitepaw bent to help her but paused when he saw Mistpaw's face.

"My assessment?" Her voice had an edge to it. Whitepaw stiffened. *Is she angry with me?*

"Your assessment," Whitepaw repeated. *What did I say wrong?* he wailed inwardly. *It was going so well, too!*

"I was going to do my assessment before I fell out of that StarClan-cursed tree?" Mistpaw asked bluntly.

"Yes," Whitepaw replied, a knot of anxiety forming in his belly. "Why?"

"Leafpelt didn't tell me," Mistpaw growled through clenched teeth. A fresh wave of terror swept through Whitepaw. He had never thought about the possibility of Mistpaw not knowing about her assessment. "How could this happen?" she wailed, dropping all the leaves from her jaw. "What horrible timing? It had to be right before my accident!"

"Mistpaw-" Whitepaw started.

"Don't talk to me!" Mistpaw hissed. Her warm blue eyes flashed icily. "If this had never happened, I would be a warrior right now!" She turned and pelted through the trees back to camp.

Whitepaw stared after her, despair clouding his thoughts. *Stupid, stupid mouse-brain!* he scolded himself. He shook himself before picking up the fallen leaves and slowly trudging back to camp.

Great StarClan, what have I done?

Chapter 12

Whitepaw found himself in a sunny field. His ears pricked as he heard the quiet scuffling of a mouse. Slowly, he stalked the mouse, setting down his paws lightly just as he had seen the other warriors do. *Careful... Just another step...*

"Whitepaw!" a voice called out from behind him. The mouse darted away.

Exasperated, Whitepaw turned around to face a pale white she-cat. "What were you thinking?" he growled. "I almost-" he broke off when he noticed the sparkle of stars in the strange cat's fur. "I'm dreaming, aren't I?" he whispered, horrified that he had growled at her. "I'm so sorry."

The she-cat's whiskers twitched in amusement. "It's all right, Whitepaw. My name is Sageblossom. I was once the medicine cat of ThunderClan many moons ago."

"Wow!" Whitepaw mewed excitedly, before growing wary as he remembered what had happened the last time he had spoken to StarClan. "What's going on?" he asked.

A cold breeze ruffled their fur, and Whitepaw shivered.

"Sorrow lies in your path, Whitepaw," Sageblossom hissed, her friendliness disappeared. Her amber eyes flashed in a warning. "Tread carefully, young medicine cat."

"W-What do you mean?" Whitepaw stammered. A strong wind began to sweep the sunny field, its winds turning the fields dark and cold. "Wait! Don't leave, please!" he yowled over the wind. "Tell me what you mean!"

Sageblossom shot him a knowing look before disappearing. With that, Whitepaw woke up with a jolt. He glanced around frantically, looking for any sign of the white medicine cat, but found none. Beside him, Mistpaw slept contentedly. Whitepaw curled back up in his nest, disappointed.

Eventually, he slipped back into restless sleep before waking up to find Heatherfur's nest cold and empty. *Where is she?*

Quietly, Whitepaw made his way out of the medicine cat den, careful not to disturb Mistpaw. He padded into the forest, following Heatherfur's scent trail, before eventually finding her grey shape crouched on the grass. Awkwardly, Whitepaw opened his mouth, wondering what to say.

"I have seen darkness for the Clan," Heatherfur murmured before turning around to face Whitepaw. "But what is StarClan implying? Have you received any signs?"

Whitepaw stared back in disbelief.

Heatherfur purred. "Remember, I trained as a warrior once. I am perfectly capable of knowing when some cat tries to sneak up on me."

Whitepaw's whiskers twitched with embarrassment before sitting down next to Heatherfur. "I had this weird dream..." he began. "I met Sageblossom, who was once a medicine cat. She told me that I had to tread carefully because sorrow lies in my path."

"Sageblossom is very wise," responded Heatherfur. "You were right to tell me. Do you understand this dream?"

"Obviously not," Whitepaw responded, his tail flicking back and forth irritably. "Why? Do you know?"

Heatherfur shook her head. "Sometimes all we can do is wait and see," she meowed. "And be careful, Whitepaw. Sageblossom was right when she warned you to be careful where you tread." Her heather-colored eyes flashed knowingly. Feeling his face heat up, he looked away.

Before Whitepaw could figure out how to respond to that, his mentor stood up. "Come," she mewed. "Let's go back before someone sends out a search patrol, hm?" Humor flickered in her eyes before she padded back to the camp. Confused and a little embarrassed, Whitepaw followed her.

Mistpaw was still sleeping when they got back. He watched Watercloud as he assigned patrols. "Dustpool, take Fireclaw, Dawnlight, and Tawnyeyes on dawn patrol," he meowed. He turned to Tawnyeyes. "Take Jaggedpaw as well. It'll be a good experience for him."

The cats nodded, and Tawnyeyes went to fetch Jaggedpaw, who was swallowing the last bit of fresh-kill. Jaggedpaw's expression changed to delight as he raised his tail happily and stood next to the patrol. Whitepaw couldn't help noticing how plump Dawnlight looked. *Greenleaf must be treating her well,* he thought, amused.

"Actually, I don't think Dawnlight should be going," Heatherfur meowed as she padded out next to Whitepaw. "Dawnlight, you know as well as I do that it's necessary for you to keep your strength up for those kits." Her gaze flitted over the she-cat's wide belly.

Kits? Whitepaw studied Dawnlight more carefully. Of course - she wasn't fat, she was expecting kits! *Call yourself a medicine cat?* he reprimanded himself sternly.

Dawnlight's expression became sheepish. "I suppose," she murmured, licking a tuft of her gray fur on her chest.

"Kits?" Featherwing bounded over to Dawnlight. "That's wonderful news!" she purred, giving her friend a swift lick on the ear.

"Did someone say kits?" Torntail poked his head out of the elders' den. "It feels like it's been moons since someone attacked my tail," he rasped wistfully.

"Dawnlight is having kits!" Featherwing mewed excitedly.

Whitepaw wondered who the father was until he noticed Cloudfur

watching proudly from a distance. "Congratulations," he meowed. "They'll be beautiful kits."

Dawnlight purred. "Thank you, Whitepaw."

Watercloud surveyed the cats in the camp. "In that case, take Featherwing," he ordered.

As the gray she-cat padded towards the patrol, Whitepaw caught her eye and blinked affectionately at her. Featherwing had resumed her warrior duties as soon as Brightpaw and Whitepaw had become apprentices.

His mentor whisked past him. "I'll check on Dawnlight and make sure that she's well-situated in the nursery," she explained to Whitepaw. "You help sort the herbs; greenleaf won't last forever."

Whitepaw nodded and headed to the back of the medicine cat den to start sorting out the herbs. *Plenty of comfrey,* he thought. *Enough feverfew to last us a while. But we're running a bit low on goldenrod...*

Beside him, Mistpaw stirred. "Sleepypaws," he teased, gathering the feverfew in one pile. "Good dreams?"

Mistpaw was fully awake now, her mist-colored eyes shining. "There was a fat mouse," she mewed dreamily.

Whitepaw rolled his eyes at Mistpaw. Embarrassed, he shifted his paws before going on. "I'm sorry about yesterday," he meowed.

Mistpaw tucked her paws under her head. "It's not your fault," she mewed. "It's just - I've always wanted to be a warrior, and now it seems so far away." Switching the subject, she asked, "Where's Jaggedpaw?" The golden tabby tom visited his littermate every morning before going on with his apprentice duties.

"Dawn patrol," he responded, carefully grabbing a pawful of sticky cobwebs.

"Jaggedpaw's going to become a warrior before me," Mistpaw sighed behind him.

"He won't," Whitepaw insisted.

Mistpaw's whiskers twitched disbelieving. "His warrior assessment is going to be very soon." She sighed, her gaze forlorn as she watched the other cats. "I'm never going to become a warrior at this rate."

"You will!" Whitepaw meowed fiercely. "I'll make sure of it."

Mistpaw gave him a long look filled with something he couldn't interpret, and Whitepaw found that he couldn't look away. "Thanks, Whitepaw," she murmured. "I'm going to fetch some fresh-kill. Do you want anything?"

"No thanks," Whitepaw mewed. He looked away as his fur ripped self-consciously.

"See you, then," Mistpaw responded. She stretched out of her nest and started to limp towards the fresh-kill pile. He watched her pick a vole and start to tear hungrily at it.

"Busy?" Heatherfur's sharp mew jolted Whitepaw's gaze away from Mistpaw.

"Heatherfur!" Whitepaw stammered. "I was just-"

Heatherfur's gaze narrowed. "Nothing to do with a certain ThunderClan apprentice?" she asked, her gaze flicking to Mistpaw.

Whitepaw bristled. "Why can't I be friends with her?"

"Are you sure what you have with her is friendship?" Heatherfur meowed. "Remember, Whitepaw, medicine cats cannot fall in love."

"I *know* that," Whitepaw spat. "For StarClan's sake, we're only friends!"

Heatherfur dipped her head. "Make sure you stick to that statement," she mewed.

Whitepaw was too furious to respond as he grabbed a pawful of juniper berries from a crack in the rock. *Who does Heatherfur think she is, trying to tell me who I can't be friends with?* Then he stopped.

Am *I just friends with Mistpaw?*

Chapter 13

Whitepaw crouched down to take a bite of a thrush next to Mistpaw. "Prey is running well," he mumbled around a mouthful of thrush.

"I wouldn't know," Mistpaw muttered back.

"Your leg is getting better," Whitepaw encouraged. "It's not long until you'll be back and running." He was about to give her ear a quick lick before pawsteps interrupted them. He turned his head to face Heatherfur's icy gaze.

"If you've got nothing better to do, Whitepaw, you can go do the elders' ticks. Torntail is complaining," she meowed briskly.

"I'm not finished eating yet," he objected. *Besides, Torntail is always complaining.*

"Then finish," Heatherfur responded coldly.

Whitepaw felt a ripple of anxiety. This was not like Heatherfur. He took one more bite out of the bird before backing away to the medicine cat den to get the mouse bile.

"See you later, Whitepaw!" Mistpaw called cheerfully.

"See you," Whitepaw echoed. He shot a hard look at Heatherfur, who was watching the entire exchange with narrowed eyes, before darting into the den. Carefully, he dipped the small wad of moss in the mouse bile and dangled it from a stick, wrinkling his nose in disgust as the foul smell reached his nostrils. Careful not to get it in his mouth, he grasped the stick in his jaws and padded to the elders' den.

"About time!" Torntail complained as he saw Whitepaw entering. "The base of my tail itches like fury."

"Don't mind him, Whitepaw," Sootfang reassured. "Torntail's as grumpy as a badger." Despite her stern words, she shot an affectionate look at the ill-tempered tom.

Whitepaw nodded gratefully to the gray she-cat before starting to work on Torntail's ticks. He found one large tick embedded in his tail, and with a dab of mouse bile, the tick released its grip on the white fur. The elder relaxed.

After finishing with Torntail and Twigsnap, Sootfang blinked at Whitepaw kindly as he approached her. "No, Whitepaw, I haven't got any ticks," she mewed. "And I'm sure that Holloweyes doesn't have any either. Isn't that right, Holloweyes?"

Holloweyes blinked her cloudy blue eyes and grunted. Whitepaw took that as a yes and padded out of the elders' den, waving his tail in goodbye. He noticed Mistpaw stretching her legs as she did her exercises and started to pad over to her, but Heatherfur intercepted him swiftly. "Whitepaw, I want you to check on Mallowfur and her kits," she ordered. "Fernkit seems to have come down with a cough. It's nothing serious, but better safe than sorry."

Whitepaw's neck fur bristled. He knew that Heatherfur was keeping him and Mistpaw separate on purpose. But he had no choice but to obey her. He dipped his head icily before heading to the nursery.

Inside the nursery, Mallowfur and her two kits scrambled over each other. The brown she-cat raised her head as Whitepaw entered, and Whitepaw could hear the relief in her voice as she spoke. "Fernkit is coughing," she told Whitepaw. "Can you take a quick look at her? It doesn't seem to be too serious, but I just want to make sure." She glanced anxiously at the Fernkit.

"I'm fine!" Fernkit mewed crossly, before breaking off into a cough.

"Fernkit's sick," Larkkit squeaked. He pounced at Whitepaw's tail, his tiny sharp claws piercing him.

"Of course," Whitepaw responded, wincing, as he swept his tail away. He shot a stern look at the brown tabby tom, who pretended not to notice. Carefully, he felt Fernkit's throat. "Just as you said, it's not serious," he reported. "She should be fine. If you'd like, I can give her a little coltsfoot."

"That would be good," Mallowfur meowed gratefully.

Whitepaw went to the medicine cat den and found the correct leaves in a rock crack. He grasped the leaves in his jaw. "Whitepaw!" Mistpaw hissed from her nest.

He glanced at her. "What is it?"

Mistpaw's gray eyes were round with worry. "Is Heatherfur trying to keep you away from me? Did I do something wrong?"

"N-No," Whitepaw stammered. He dropped the leaves at his paws. "I don't know why," he lied, his voice clear now that he wasn't grasping the leaves anymore.

Mistpaw sniffed disbelieving. "Right."

"Can we talk about this later?" Whitepaw hissed under his breath as he picked up the leaves again. "I have to go give Fernkit this coltsfoot."

"Alright," Mistpaw mewed sulkily. As Whitepaw padded away, he could feel Mistpaw's gaze burning into his pelt. *But you can't think about that,* he reminded himself.

"I'm back," he meowed. He dropped the coltsfoot to his paws and began to chew the leaves into a pulp. Fernkit watched with round eyes as he dropped the pulp to the leaf. "Swallow it."

Fernkit stared at the pulp dubiously before picking it up and swallowing it. Whitepaw massaged her throat to help her swallow. "Ew, that's yucky!" she squeaked.

Whitepaw stifled a purr of amusement and nodded to Mallowfur. "It's probably just kitten-cough. She'll be alright."

"Thank you, Whitepaw," Mallowfur mewed. "You're shaping up to be a fine medicine cat. Heatherfur must be training you well."

Whitepaw blinked at her, a little embarrassed. "Er, thanks," he meowed before backing away.

He returned to the medicine cat den, where Mistpaw was grooming herself. Heatherfur was nowhere to be found. "There's a stray piece of bracken on your tail," he told her. "And where's Heatherfur?"

Mistpaw blinked at him. "Thanks," she mewed as she brushed the bracken off. "Heatherfur said she was going to go collect some herbs to prepare for Dawnlight's kits. Is she really separating us?"

Whitepaw sighed. "Yes," he admitted.

"Why?" Mistpaw's gaze sharpened with interest. "Don't say that you don't know, because I know you do."

Whitepaw rested his head on his paws. "We're not supposed to get too close to other cats," he finally meowed. "Medicine cat things."

Mistpaw looked confused before she nodded in understanding. "But we're just friends, right?"

"That's what I told Heatherfur," Whitepaw mewed as he prodded his nest with one paw. "But she wouldn't listen to me." Shyly, he met Mistpaw's clear gaze.

"Maybe she has a point," she murmured. "But it can't be that strict, can it?" When Whitepaw didn't answer, she pressed on. "You can still heal and care for your Clanmates just as well."

"I know." He picked at a piece of bracken on his nest. "But it just won't work."

"It won't work with your medicine cat duties, or it just won't work with me?" Her voice was heavy with hurt.

"No!" Whitepaw hissed. "Can't you see? I swore to heal and care for my Clanmates and follow the medicine cat code. I can't just break it so easily."

"No one else has to know," she mewed quietly. Mistpaw stretched out her head to touch his muzzle to his pelt, tingling his fur. "Your feelings matter too."

Whitepaw held her unwavering gaze for a long time. "I can keep a secret," he breathed.

Chapter 14

Heatherfur took one last sniff at Mistpaw's leg. "It looks fine now, Mistpaw," she meowed. "You're free to resume your apprentice duties. Just take it easy on that leg, alright?"

Mistpaw stretched out her leg in the warm sunshine. "Finally!" With one last nod to Whitepaw and Heatherfur, she raced to Leafpelt, who was sitting nearby giving his pale chest fur a thorough licking.

From the way Leafpelt's green eyes gleamed as Mistpaw told him the news, Whitepaw could tell that the light-colored tom was just as excited as his apprentice. Jaggedpaw, who was eating a juicy-looking vole, hurried over to Mistpaw and twined his tail with hers.

The two apprentices were closer than most littermates. The golden tabby tom had refused to begin his warrior assessment until Mistpaw was better so they could become warriors together. Mistpaw had insisted he didn't need to, but Jaggedpaw remained with his decision stubbornly.

"It doesn't look like Mistpaw is going to listen to your 'take it easy'," Whitepaw commented. Heatherfur snorted in amusement.

"I didn't expect her to," she responded. Turning around, she called over her shoulder, "You should get yourself a piece of fresh-kill. There's enough for every cat today." Whitepaw nodded happily and padded over to the fresh-kill pile. Brightpaw intercepted him with a squirrel in her jaws.

"Do you want to share this?" she asked, her voice muffled around the fresh-kill.

"Sure!" Whitepaw replied. He crouched down and took a bite out of the plump squirrel. Out of the corner of his eye, he watched Mistpaw as Leafpelt meowed excitedly to her. Inwardly, he sighed. *I'll miss having her in the medicine cat den,* he admitted to himself. *She always makes it more interesting.*

His cream-colored littermate followed Whitepaw's gaze. "Look who's padding after a certain gray apprentice," his sister teased.

Whitepaw snapped his head around. "I'm not!" he mewed fiercely.

Brightpaw seemed a little taken aback. "I'm sorry," she muttered. "I was just kidding."

Whitepaw let his fur relax. "Sorry, Brightpaw," he mewed. "It's just... you know..."

Brightpaw prodded him with one paw. "I get it." Whitepaw was relieved to see affection shimmering in her eyes. "Now, eat," she ordered. "That squirrel isn't going to eat itself."

Whitepaw let out a purr of laughter. "It certainly isn't!" He took a large bite out of the squirrel and relaxed. Behind him, he heard fast pawsteps.

"Guess what?" Hollypaw mewed excitedly.

Without waiting for their answer, Squirrelpaw settled down proudly and declared, "We're going to be warriors!"

"When?" Brightpaw asked.

"We're having our warrior assessment tomorrow," Hollypaw boasted. "We're going to be the best warriors ever!"

"I wonder what name I'll have," Squirrelpaw said thoughtfully. "Squirrelpelt? Squirreltail?"

Brightpaw huffed. "Now that you're going to be warriors, there'll be fewer apprentices to do the elders' ticks."

"You still have Jaggedpaw," Hollypaw offered.

"And Mistpaw," Whitepaw added.

"Is Mistpaw better?" Squirrelpaw asked. Whitepaw nodded. "That's great!" she exclaimed. "Now she'll be able to become a warrior just like us!"

A sharp pang pierced his heart. *I've gotten too used to seeing her every day,* he admitted. Suddenly, the meaty squirrel didn't seem so appetizing anymore. "I'm not hungry anymore," he meowed, rising to his paws.

Brightpaw gazed at him, disappointment darkening her gaze. "But Squirrelpaw and Hollypaw are going to have their warrior ceremony soon!"

"I'll be back before then," Whitepaw reassured them. As he headed towards the entrance, Heatherfur's mew sounded behind him.

"Are you collecting herbs?" she asked, padding up to him. "We're low on coltsfoot. I used the last bit on Fernkit's cough."

"I'll do that," Whitepaw meowed. Heatherfur gave him a brisk nod, and Whitepaw headed towards the entrance.

Once he got out, he breathed in the musky scent of the forest. *I can't imagine how WindClan manages to live on the moor.* As he headed towards the area where the yellow coltsfoot bloomed, he heard a voice.

"You're not welcome here," someone snarled. Whitepaw recognized Mouseclaw's rough voice. Creeping slowly, he watched through a patch of ferns. An unfamiliar tang reached his nostrils, and he opened his jaws to taste the air. *What* is *that scent?*

Finally, Whitepaw spotted a plump tabby she-cat, no more than a kit. A Twoleg collar was fastened around her neck. *A kittypet!* he thought. *I wonder why kittypets even* want *to live with Twolegs.*

His focus was averted back to the exchange, however, when the tabby spoke. "I'm sorry," she mewed happily, unaware of the threatening gaze Mousclaw bore. "But the forest is just so interesting! I tried catching a mouse, but I didn't get it." She

brightened. "I'll get it next time!"

Mouseclaw slid out his claws threateningly. "This is ThunderClan territory," he growled.

The tabby blinked back at him. "Surely there's enough prey for every cat. It's warm-weather right now."

Warm-weather? Whitepaw frowned. *I suppose she means greenleaf.*

Mouseclaw hissed at her, and the tabby finally got the hint. She started to back away, her eyes widening with terror. *Run,* Whitepaw thought. *You can still make it.*

With a yowl, Mouseclaw flung himself at the tabby, claws unsheathed. Whitepaw watched with horror as Mouseclaw tore at the helpless tabby mercilessly.

He couldn't watch anymore. "Stop!" he yowled as he dashed out of his hiding spot. "Mouseclaw, stop!"

Mouseclaw loosened his grip on the she-kit, who lay there dazed as blood pumped out of her wounds. "What are you doing here?" he snarled.

"Mouseclaw, she's no more than a kit," Whitepaw pleaded.

Mouseclaw gazed at him coolly before completely loosening his grip on the tabby. "You can go," he hissed. "But you won't be back in a hurry, or this mouse-heart"- he jerked his head over to Whitepaw- "won't be here to save you."

Finally, the tabby seemed to get over most of the shock and scrambled to her feet. Limping, she managed to pad back to the Twolegplace. Once she was out of hearing distance, Whitepaw turned to stare at Mouseclaw.

"Why?" he asked.

Mouseclaw returned his stare with narrowed amber eyes that glowed with a challenge. "She was weak," he growled softly. "Tread carefully, apprentice." Before Whitepaw could figure out how to

answer that, he padded away.

Whitepaw was left in the forest alone, still staring at the pool of dark blood where the kittypet had laid. It felt sticky underneath his paws.

I can't let Mouseclaw take power. He'll destroy us all.